EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

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Students Tuesday takeover of Epsom Picturehouse

16 January 2026



Students from **University for the Creative Arts** (UCA) in Epsom are set to return to **Epsom Picturehouse** later this month with another imaginative cinema takeover – this time built around the release of *Marty Supreme*.

The one-night event takes place on **Tuesday 20th January**, with activities beginning at **6.30pm**, and forms part of UCA Epsom's *Experience Economy* module. Rather than focusing on conventional event mana

The January screening will again see students working directly with the Picturehouse team to create an enhanced, interactive evening that goes beyond simply watching a film. While full details are being kept under wraps, organisers promise live elements and audience interaction designed to complement the themes and setting of the film.

The collaboration builds on last year's well-received student takeover, which re-imagined *Be Kind Rewind* as a playful, hands-on cinema experience. That event featured live performances, green-screen activities and interactive installations that transformed the building into a temporary creative hub and demonstrated how cinema can function as a shared social space rather than a purely passive one.

This year's focus is *Marty Supreme*, a new film set in 1950s New York and starring **Timothée Chalamet** as Marty Mauser, a driven outsider determined to become a champion table-tennis player and turn the sport into a nationwide phenomenon. The story's emphasis on confidence, ambition and refusing to be overlooked has provided fertile ground for students developing ideas around performance, identity and audience participation.

Epsom Picturehouse, which opened in 2018, has become a central part of the town's cultural life, combining six screens showing independent cinema and mainstream releases with a café-bar that is used for talks, community events and special screenings. The venue is part of the Picturehouse chain, known nationally for its focus on curated programming and local partnerships.

UCA's Epsom campus, located at the former Epsom School of Art, specialises in creative business, marketing and performance-related courses, with an emphasis on practical collaboration with external organisations. Projects such as the Picturehouse takeover form part of the university's wider approach to linking students with real-world audiences and venues.

Joe Stroud, Marketing Manager at Epsom Picturehouse, said the partnership reflects a shared commitment to creativity and community, adding that working with students brings fresh perspectives into the cinema and helps re-imagine how audiences experience film.

The *Marty Supreme* cinema takeover is a **one-night-only** event, with tickets available via the Picturehouse website.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Epsom Dance Group in World Championship

16 January 2026



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An Epsom-based dance competition team is preparing to take to the international stage after being selected to represent Team England at the Dance World Cup 2026 in Dublin next summer.

CMDC (Charmille Dance Collective) received the news just before Christmas that one of its groups and two solo dancers had been chosen for the prestigious world finals, following national qualifying rounds.

Founder Charlotte Liddle said:
“We are thrilled that one of our groups and two solo dancers have been selected to represent Team England at the Dance World Cup in Dublin next year.”

The Dance World Cup is an annual, large-scale international competition focused on children and young adults, typically aged between five and 25. Dancers qualify through national competitions or video selection before reaching the world finals, making selection highly competitive.

The 2026 finals will take place at the Convention Centre Dublin from Wednesday 8 to Saturday 18 July 2026. Organisers expect more than 120,000 competitors from over 70 countries, competing across a wide range of styles including classical, contemporary, street, hip hop and theatrical dance. The event is widely regarded as one of the largest all-genre youth dance competitions in the world and a major milestone for young dancers.

Charmille Dance Collective was founded by sisters Charlotte and Millie Liddle, both graduates of the Laine Theatre of Arts. Despite being a relatively new team, CMDC has already built a strong competitive record, including a second-place finish at the All England finals in 2024.

Co-founder Millie Liddle said:
“We are so proud of the girls and how far they have come in such a short time. Their dedication and hard work have been incredible, and they truly deserve this opportunity.”

Before heading to Dublin, the team will be balancing intensive training with fund-raising activities to help cover travel and competition costs, as they look to give themselves the best chance of building on Team England’s previous successes at the event.

Charmille Dance Collective is a community dance team based in Epsom. Founded by sisters Charlotte and Millie Liddle, former students atr Epsom’s Laine Theatre Arts, the group competes at regional and national dance competitions across the UK.

Charlotte and Millie welcome help to fund the trip:

https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/charmille-dance-world-cup

Sam Jones – Reporter



Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up

16 January 2026



BBC LDRS reports: A Surrey council [Epsom and Ewell] must pay out up to £500,000 after failing to properly check the condition of a major leisure centre before handing it over to a new operator. Poor ventilation, damp and ‘possible roof cracks’ were cited as some of the problems related to the “fabric” of the building.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has agreed to cover the costs of urgent repairs at Rainbow Leisure Centre after the new contractors took over the site and uncovered a long list of issues, some relating to the structure and fabric of the building. Places Leisure took over the contract on October 1, 2025, but has not yet signed on the dotted line, the LDRS understands.

The pay out was approved via a confidential urgent decision, seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), after Places Leisure said it should not be responsible for fixing the issues.

An urgent decision is when a council cannot wait until the usual decision-making committee process as it could harm the public or council interests.

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Some of the problems relate to the fabric of the building, for which the council is responsible, the LDRS understands. This is despite the council previously insisting it had carried out such checks.

In a public report dated June 2025, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council said it had commissioned a stock condition report to make sure the building was handed over in good nick.

As the LDRS understands, council officers believed the centre would be handed back in good condition. An external consultant was used, but their inspection was not invasive, meaning hidden problems may not have been picked up. But just six months later, the authority is now facing a bill of up to £500k to fix problems that either were missed or not properly dealt with because the council did not know about them.

When Places took over, it found issues it believed the previous operator should have fixed. Some of the problems raised include:

- Fire alarm faults
- Lift issues
- Broken seating
- Damaged glazing
- Faulty toilets
- Poor ventilation
- Damp
- Possible roof cracks
- Machinery at “end of life”

Some were flagged as health and safety risks, meaning urgent action was needed to keep the centre safe and open.

The council has now agreed to let Places carry out the repairs and reclaim the costs by reducing the management fee it pays back to the council. Officers said this is the “most cost-effective” option, but it effectively means residents are picking up the tab.

Why is the council paying?
Under the contract, some repairs fall to the council as landlord responsibilities. Others may be recoverable from former operator GLL, but legal experts warn the council is unlikely to claw back the full amount. GLL has been contacted for comment. [See below for additional reporting.]

The authority plans to dip into its ‘dilapidation’ reserve, a pot of money set aside for building repairs, to cover the shortfall. Officers admit the final cost is still being worked out, but estimate it could reach up to £500,000.

Opposition fury
Councillors have slammed the council for not knowing the state of its own properties.

Cllr **Alex Coley**, member of the Independent group (Ruxley), said: “I’d have hoped that the council as landlord would understand the condition of the leisure centre to establish its potential liability.”

Labour group leader, Cllr **Kate Chinn**, (Court) hit out at the ruling Residents’ Association (RA), calling the situation a “shocking scandal”.

She said: “This secrecy wasn’t about keeping the costs involved from the parties to the negotiations as they already know them. It was about preventing the public from learning how incompetent the RA are.”

She added: “Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) has rightly owned this fiasco, but without realising that his ‘nothing to see’ attitude that council tax payers should expect to be routinely stuck with bills on this scale shows how complacent he is with their money.”

She accused the ruling group of being distracted: “The RA have clearly taken their eye off the ball as they focus on a self-serving attempt to create new parish councils and new roles for themselves.”

Cllr **James Lawrence**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group (College), said the situation shows “the importance of maintaining key properties so they are in good working condition and ensuring the status of our properties is communicated to both councillors and residents in good time.”

Council response
Council leaders defended the decision, saying negotiations are normal during handovers. Councillors Neil Dallen and **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said: “Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred to a new operator, Places Leisure, on 1 October 2025. Since then, we’ve been pleased to see a number of improvements at the centre.

“This marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the leisure centre… including significant investment to upgrade the gym, studios, swimming changing rooms and more, which are already underway.”

They added: “With any handover, it is normal practice for there to be negotiations around works to be carried out which form part of the contract finalisation.”

However, they refused to release further information, saying: “Details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain.”

Places Leisure

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A spokesperson said: “Places Leisure took over the operation and management of Rainbow Leisure Centre in partnership with Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 1st October 2025. We are excited to work closely with the Council to implement changes and significant investment at the centre to make a positive impact for the local community.”

Emily Dalton LDRS – the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service

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Additional reporting from Epsom and Ewell Times:

In a further twist GLL has supplied Epsom and Ewell Times a response to the issues: ““*GLL was proud to partner with Epsom and Ewell Council on the design and opening of Rainbow Leisure Centre over 20 years ago. This innovative and award-winning centre has been extremely successful over the 20 years of GLL’s tenure, engaging millions of local residents in activity, improving their health and wellbeing.*

“GLL is unaware of any legal claim that the Council is looking to bring in relation to the standard of the building on handover, especially as there are set protocols to deal with building handovers prior to any instigation of legal action. As background, the Council undertook, via specialist contractors, a full survey of the building prior to GLL exiting. As is normal in all leisure transfers, items that were identified for [repair or rectification] in that survey for GLL were all completed prior to handover and signed off by the specialist contractors on behalf of the Council. GLL handed the building over to the standard required by the Council and under the contract.”

It is normal practice for Councils as landlords to have rights of periodic entry and inspection of premises it engages contractors to manage. Either the Council was negligent in failing to insert such rights in the contract with GLL or the Council has been negligent over an extended period of years in failing to carry out inspections or to carry out inspections properly.

The Council has made fully public announcements that Places commenced its contract on 1st October 2025. See Epsom and Ewell Times report: Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators. The Information Commissioner has made plain that Council’s cannot evade accountability by claims of ongoing contractual negotiations. The tender process having ended for both GLL and Places means there is little if any financially sensitive information to protect justifying a confidential label on information that exposes probable Council incompetence.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked Epsom and Ewell Borough Council a series of questions about these issues and received the same “nothing to see here” response from Cllr Dallen as obtained by the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) reporter Emily Dalton, as above. The Epsom and Ewell Times has thus submitted to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council formal Freedom of Information Act demands for relevant information.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related reports:

Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators

Gold star at the end of the Rainbow

Pot of gold for Rainbow?

From the Cosmos to Commerce: University of Surrey Leads the Way

16 January 2026



The University of Surrey has been showcasing a remarkable breadth of achievement in recent weeks, with major advances announced across fundamental science, international collaboration, digital trade policy and lifetime academic excellence.

From unlocking the origins of the universe’s rarest elements, to shaping the future of UK trade infrastructure and celebrating world-leading research careers, the University’s latest announcements underline its growing national and international impact.

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Unlocking the universe’s rarest elements

Surrey scientists are leading a new £215,100 international research project that aims to transform understanding of how chemical elements are formed during extreme cosmic events such as supernovae, neutron-star collisions and X-ray bursts.

Funded by the Royal Society’s International Science Partnership Fund, the three-year project brings together researchers from Surrey, Kyushu University and Japan’s world-leading RIKEN laboratory. The team will develop and deploy cutting-edge instruments capable of measuring some of the rarest and most unstable atomic nuclei ever studied.

These exotic isotopes do not exist naturally on Earth and can only be created briefly in advanced physics laboratories. By measuring their mass and decay rates for the first time, researchers hope to refine theoretical models of nuclear structure and gain new insight into how the heaviest elements in the universe are formed.

Experiments will take place at RIKEN’s Rare-Radioactive Isotope Ring, a unique facility that allows repeated observation of these short-lived nuclei. Surrey researchers will play a central role, leading the design and testing of advanced detector and data-acquisition systems in the UK ahead of the experimental programme in Japan.

The collaboration is also expected to strengthen scientific ties between the UK and Japan and reinforce the UK’s position at the forefront of nuclear physics research.

Warning over UK digital trade and border fragmentation

In a very different field, new research from Surrey Business School and the Centre for the Decentralised Digital Economy has issued a stark warning that the UK risks falling behind global competitors in digital trade unless urgent action is taken.

The study argues that the UK’s digital border initiatives are fragmented, with no single organisation responsible for coordinating legislation, technology platforms and end-to-end border processes. As a result, businesses face repeated data requests, delays and uncertainty, increasing costs rather than reducing friction.

Researchers examined UK trade and border policies since 2017, including the 2025 UK Border Strategy, recent digital trade legislation and multiple government pilot projects. Drawing on international case studies and academic research, the team proposes a collaborative governance framework to guide reform.

The report calls for the government to give one body a clear mandate to orchestrate policy, digital platforms and data standards across departments. It argues that, with the right leadership, the UK has a window of opportunity to create a new digital “silk road” for trade, enabling trusted data sharing that benefits smaller firms as well as multinationals.

Lifetime achievement recognised in materials science

Surrey’s excellence in research was further highlighted by the announcement that Professor Joseph Keddie, Professor of Soft Matter Physics, has been awarded the 2026 Sir Eric Rideal Award for lifetime achievement in colloid and interface science.

Jointly awarded by the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Society of Chemical Industry, the prestigious honour recognises sustained and distinguished contributions to the field. Professor Keddie is internationally known for pioneering work on polymer colloids, sustainable materials and so-called “living materials”, with applications ranging from coatings and adhesives to wastewater treatment and bioremediation.

Over a career spanning more than three decades, he has authored more than 150 academic publications, holds multiple patents and co-authored the influential book *Fundamentals of Latex Film Formation*. His work at Surrey has previously been recognised by major awards from both the Institute of Physics and the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Professor Keddie will deliver the Rideal Lecture, titled *More than Watching Paint Dry*, on 8 April 2026, presenting highlights from his research including self-layering coatings and carbon-storing “living paints”.

A university with global reach

Taken together, the announcements paint a picture of a university operating at the cutting edge across disciplines: advancing fundamental science on a global stage, influencing national policy debates, and nurturing research careers with lasting international impact.

For Surrey residents, the achievements reinforce the University of Surrey’s role not only as a local institution, but as a centre of innovation and expertise with reach far beyond Guildford.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell lags Surrey's recycling front-runners, new tracker shows

16 January 2026



Surrey's self-assessment – and what sits behind it

A new "Surrey Waste Tracker" published by the Surrey Environment Partnership (SEP) claims Surrey is one of the best performing areas in England for recycling and low landfill. The tracker uses data for the 2023–24 year and compares Surrey County Council with 28 "similar" waste authorities across England.

SEP reports that 54.5% of Surrey's total household waste is recycled, reused or composted, placing Surrey joint second out of 29 comparable authorities. Surrey households produced around 445kg of rubbish per home, said to be eighth out of 29 and better than an England average of around 511kg. Just 0.2% of Surrey's household waste went to landfill, compared with an England average of 5.5%, and 85% of Surrey's waste is processed in the UK rather than exported.

The tracker does not spell out which 28 other authorities Surrey is being measured against, nor does it cite the exact national datasets used for those comparisons.

How independent national data stacks up

Provisional government waste statistics for 2023–24 show that, across England as a whole, the household recycling rate is around 44%. The same official release reports that 5.5% of local authority-collected waste in England was sent to landfill.

Taken together, these independent figures broadly support SEP's central message: Surrey's recycling rate is around ten percentage points higher than the England average, Surrey sends a much smaller share of its waste to landfill than the country as a whole, and Surrey households appear to be producing less residual rubbish than the average English household.

However, the 42.3% "England average" recycling figure quoted on the Surrey Waste Tracker is slightly lower than the 44% national rate reported by government, suggesting SEP may be using a different measure or earlier cut of the same data.

Where Epsom and Ewell sits in the Surrey league

The tracker also breaks down performance by each of Surrey's 11 district and borough councils, including Epsom and Ewell. For each area it publishes annual rubbish per household (in kg), the proportion of household waste recycled, reused or composted, and the proportion of recycling processed within the UK.

On those measures, **Epsom and Ewell** is a low performer within Surrey, but well behind the best-performing districts.

Recycling rate: Epsom and Ewell recycles, reuses or composts 52.1% of its household waste. This places it ninth out of the 11 Surrey districts and boroughs on the recycling measure, while Surrey Heath leads the county on 58.9%, with Guildford and Tandridge close behind.

Rubbish per household: Epsom and Ewell households produce 402.3kg of rubbish per year. That is better than Elmbridge and Spelthorne, but still ninth out of 11 when ranked from lowest to highest residual waste. Surrey Heath again tops this table with 341.2kg per household.

How much recycling stays in the UK: Only 63.7% of Epsom and Ewell's collected recycling is processed within the UK, the lowest share in Surrey. Several councils send a much higher proportion of recyclables to UK facilities, including Reigate and Banstead, Guildford and Tandridge.

Surrey district and borough waste league table, 2023–24

Based on the Surrey Waste Tracker's published data, the picture across the 11 local areas is as follows, ranked by recycling rate from highest to lowest:

Rank (recycling)	District / Borough	Rubbish per household (kg)	Proportion recycled / reused / composted (%)	Proportion of recycling processed in UK (%)
1	Surrey Heath	341.2	58.9	76.8

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Rank (recycling)	District / Borough	Rubbish per household (kg)	Proportion recycled / reused / composted (%)	Proportion of recycling processed in UK (%)
2	Guildford	347.5	57.9	84.6
3	Tandridge	361.5	57.8	84.2
4	Waverley	350.0	57.0	75.3
5	Mole Valley	362.1	56.4	72.2
6	Woking	348.1	56.4	73.1
7	Elmbridge	407.5	54.2	72.6
8	Reigate and Banstead	381.2	54.2	96.2
9	Epsom and Ewell	402.3	52.1	63.7
10	Runnymede	386.4	46.8	71.5
11	Spelthorne	439.3	44.5	70.7

On this reading, Epsom and Ewell recycles a larger share of its waste than the national average, but less than eight of its ten Surrey neighbours, produces more rubbish per household than most Surrey areas, and sends the smallest proportion of its recycling to UK plants.

Who owns the Surrey Environment Partnership?

The Surrey Waste Tracker is published by the Surrey Environment Partnership, which is a partnership between Surrey County Council and the 11 district and borough councils. SEP is therefore not an external watchdog but a joint project of the councils whose performance it reports on.

The tracker draws on data that councils are legally required to report to central government through the WasteDataFlow system, which the government then uses to produce national statistics. However, it does not identify the 28 “similar areas” Surrey is compared with, nor the criteria for including them, and it does not explicitly reference the government publications from which national averages appear to be taken.

For residents in Epsom and Ewell, the Surrey Waste Tracker offers a useful snapshot of local performance within a strong-performing county, while also raising questions of transparency and comparability. The extent to which the borough can close the gap with Surrey’s recycling leaders, and keep more of its recycling treatment within the UK, is likely to remain a live policy issue for years ahead.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Image: Landfill site in UK by M J Richardson CC BY-SA 2.0

Since publication of the above report the Surrey Environmental Partnership has issued the following helpful clarification:

Unfortunately, there was an error in the number of authorities that we compared Surrey with. The report originally listed that there were 29 similar authorities, when in fact it was 27. This has now been amended on our website – Surrey Environment Partnership – Surrey Waste Tracker. The authorities that Surrey compares to are the other waste disposal authorities in England.

The article also mentions a discrepancy between the figure of 42.3% that we used for England’s recycling rate compared to the figure of 44.0%. Just to clarify that 44.0% is England’s recycling rate for the calendar year of 2023 whereas 42.3% is England’s recycling rate for 2023-24, which is the period that our report covers.

Finally, with regard to the source of the data, the source is Defra’s publicly available data, which can be found here – Local authority collected waste management – annual results – GOV.UK.

We have made a note to include the above level of detail in Surrey Waste Tracker reports from hereon.

Epsom Hospital faces flu challenge

16 January 2026

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Hospitals serving Epsom and Ewell are facing one of their toughest starts to a year in recent memory, with dozens of beds taken up by flu patients and others closed because of infection control, as winter illnesses surge across the country.

As of Sunday, 45 beds across St George's, Epsom and St Helier hospitals were occupied by patients with influenza, according to the St George's, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group. At the same time, further beds have had to be taken out of use due to flu and norovirus outbreaks, reducing the system's overall capacity just as demand is rising.

The combination of cold weather, widespread winter viruses and a growing number of patients needing specialist treatment has created what NHS leaders locally describe as a "bleak" start to the new year.

Elaine Clancy, Group Chief Nurse for St George's, Epsom and St Helier, said hospitals across the group were seeing "some very sick patients" as winter illnesses and low temperatures take their toll. "Don't make the mistake of thinking flu is just a bad cold," she said. "These figures show the infection can make people seriously ill, and I'd urge people to take steps to ensure they and their loved ones don't suffer."

A national problem, not just local

The pressure on Epsom and St Helier reflects a wider national trend. NHS England has warned that socialising over Christmas and New Year is likely to have fuelled a rebound in flu, Covid-19 and other winter viruses, with senior figures cautioning that the worst of the season is "far from over".

Across England, hospitals are again reporting high numbers of admissions for respiratory illness, alongside continued demand from people with complex medical needs who are more vulnerable in cold weather. The knock-on effect is felt most sharply in accident and emergency departments, where delays grow when wards are full and patients cannot be moved on.

Public health experts have long warned that flu remains a serious illness, particularly for older people, pregnant women and those with underlying conditions. In bad seasons, it contributes to thousands of excess deaths nationally, even though it is often dismissed as minor.

Norovirus, meanwhile, spreads rapidly in hospitals and care settings, forcing wards or bays to close for deep cleaning, further reducing available beds at precisely the moment they are most needed.

What people can do

Local NHS leaders are urging residents to take simple but effective steps to reduce the spread of infection and help protect the health service. These include getting vaccinated against flu if eligible, washing hands regularly, staying at home if unwell, and avoiding contact with vulnerable people when displaying symptoms. Keeping homes warm – ideally at 18°C or above in key rooms – and wrapping up when going outdoors also helps reduce the risk of illness.

People are also being asked to use health services appropriately, so that emergency departments remain available for those in urgent need. NHS 111, which is available online and by phone 24 hours a day, can direct people to the right service, while community pharmacists can advise on many minor illnesses and treatments.

Residents are encouraged to check on neighbours, friends and family who may be vulnerable, to make sure they have food, medication and adequate heating during the cold snap.

With flu and winter viruses still circulating widely, health leaders say the coming weeks will be critical — both for hospitals trying to manage demand, and for communities doing their part to keep themselves and others safe.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related report:

Epsom Hospital braces for flu spike

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Epsom lamppost flags: symbol of pride — or cause of anxiety?

16 January 2026



Across parts of Epsom and Ewell, the appearance of Union Jack flags tied to lampposts has prompted sharply differing reactions. For some residents, the flag remains a symbol of shared identity and national belonging. For others, the manner of their sudden arrival — often without permission and fixed to public infrastructure — has caused unease, sparking wider anxieties about division, ownership of public space, and the meaning of patriotism in modern Britain.

In September 2025 Surrey County Council restated its position on flags and attachments to street furniture, reminding residents that anything fixed to a lamppost or painted on a public highway requires formal consent. The council emphasised safety considerations for drivers, pedestrians and maintenance crews, and said unauthorised attachments may be removed during inspections. Residents wishing to display flags on public land are advised to apply in advance through established procedures. The council was clear, however, that anyone may fly a flag from their own property if they wish to do so.

The debate has not only been technical or regulatory. One local resident, writing to the *Epsom and Ewell Times*, described attempting to remove some of the flags in their neighbourhood and being confronted in the process. Their concern was less about flags as symbols, and more about how — and by whom — they were placed, and whether they were being used to signal exclusion rather than unity. The writer reflected on the way social and political polarisation in recent years has shaped how national imagery is read, and expressed frustration at what they saw as a lack of clarity over which authority is responsible for removing unauthorised items from street furniture.

Others in the borough have reacted very differently, seeing the flags as benign expressions of pride, or as gestures intended to lift spirits at a time of economic and social uncertainty. Some residents have argued that the Union Jack should not be regarded as belonging to any one political tradition, recalling moments when people across the country — including at national sporting events and during major civic occasions — have gathered beneath it without controversy.

That broader question — who “owns” the flag — has recurred throughout modern political history. When crowds waved the Union Jack outside Downing Street on the night of Labour’s 1997 election victory, commentators spoke of the centre-left “reclaiming” national symbolism from the political right, attempting to make it inclusive rather than exclusive. Others have suggested that opportunities were later missed to develop a more layered sense of identity, for example by flying the European Union flag alongside the Union Jack on public buildings, as was commonplace in many EU member states. For some, that dual display might have normalised a shared British and European identity; for others it would itself have been contentious. The difficulty of striking a balance illustrates how strongly flags can be read in different ways.

In Epsom and Ewell, the present concerns appear to rest less on the flag itself than on process, tone and consent. The sudden appearance of flags on lampposts — without clear identification of who has installed them and without permission from the asset-owning authority — has left some residents feeling unsettled or excluded, while leaving councils fielding questions about responsibility and enforcement. The practicalities are not trivial: removing items at height may require equipment, contractor time and public money.

One constructive suggestion arising from local discussions is that the right of individuals to fly a flag from their own homes could be matched by a more open and confident approach from civic bodies, schools, churches, voluntary groups and local businesses — flying the Union Jack from their own buildings in clearly identifiable and lawful ways, and on agreed occasions. In that model, the flag becomes visible as a symbol belonging to all, rather than as an anonymous street-level intervention that some interpret as a political statement.

Another proposal is for clearer published guidance from the relevant authorities — setting out who owns which assets, how permission can be sought, what safety standards apply, and how residents may raise concerns or objections. Transparency about due process may help reduce tension, even where views differ about meaning and symbolism.

What the current debate in Epsom and Ewell perhaps most clearly reveals is that flags still carry emotional weight — capable of reassuring some while unsettling others. Between those positions lies a space for thoughtful discussion about how shared symbols are used in public places, and how a sense of belonging can be fostered without causing anxiety to neighbours who may read them differently.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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If you have a considered view on this topic feel free to write to The Epsom and Ewell Times.

Related report:

Surrey County Council flags up the flag issue

Problem Pavement Parking Powers Promised

16 January 2026



The Government has announced plans to give councils across England new legal powers to tackle pavement parking, following years of concern from disability groups, parents, and local campaigners about blocked pavements forcing people into the road.

In a statement issued on 8 January, the Department for Transport said the changes are intended to make it easier for local authorities to restrict pavement parking across wider areas, rather than relying on street-by-street restrictions that can be slow and complex to introduce.

The Department said blocked pavements create serious barriers for wheelchair users, parents with pushchairs, blind or partially sighted people, and older residents, limiting independence and making everyday journeys less safe. Ministers say the new approach will allow councils to act where pavement parking causes the greatest local problems, while retaining flexibility where limited pavement parking may still be considered acceptable.

Local Transport Minister Lilian Greenwood said clear pavements are essential for people to move around safely and independently, and that councils will be given the power to “crack down on problem pavement parking” while taking account of local conditions. National organisations including Guide Dogs and the RAC welcomed the announcement, calling for consistent enforcement and proportionate use of the new powers.

Surrey County Council: details awaited

Responding to questions from Epsom and Ewell Times, Surrey County Council said it welcomed the announcement but stressed that it is too early to comment on how it might operate in practice.

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said the authority is “looking forward to finding out more about new powers allowing local authorities to tackle antisocial pavement parking,” but added that further detail is needed on what exactly is proposed and what the powers will entail once introduced. The council said it would be happy to revisit the issue once more information is shared by the Department for Transport.

The Government has said that guidance on how councils should use the new powers will be published later in 2026.

Local MP claims campaign success

The announcement was welcomed by Epsom and Ewell MP **Helen Maguire**, who described it as a significant step forward following sustained local and parliamentary campaigning.

Ms Maguire said she had raised pavement parking repeatedly in Parliament, including through a Westminster Hall debate, an Early Day Motion, written questions to ministers, and local campaigning with residents. She said pavement parking makes streets unsafe and inaccessible, and that no one should be forced into the road when walking to school or the shops.

Following the announcement, the Minister for Local Transport wrote directly to Ms Maguire, thanking her for her advocacy and citing her work in highlighting the challenges caused by pavement parking.

What powers already exist?

At present, pavement parking outside London is not subject to a general nationwide ban. Enforcement relies on a patchwork of existing powers, which can be limited or difficult to apply.

Yellow line parking restrictions, for example, apply from the centre of the carriageway to the highway boundary, which usually includes the pavement. However, these restrictions only apply during the signed controlled hours and do not always prevent vehicles from mounting the pavement if enforcement is not prioritised.

Councils can also act where a vehicle causes an obstruction of the highway, an offence under existing road traffic legislation. In practice, enforcement is often reserved for cases where access is completely blocked, such as preventing wheelchair passage or emergency access. This can leave many partially obstructed pavements unaddressed.

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Local authorities may also introduce specific Traffic Regulation Orders banning pavement parking on individual streets or sections of road, but this process can be time-consuming, requires consultation and signage, and is rarely applied borough-wide.

The Government has said the new powers are intended to move away from this piecemeal approach, allowing councils to introduce area-wide pavement parking restrictions more easily, while still permitting exemptions where pavements are wide enough and pedestrian access is not compromised.

What happens next?

The Department for Transport says further guidance will be published later this year, setting out how councils can use the new powers in a proportionate and locally appropriate way. Until then, councils such as Surrey County Council say they are unable to comment on how enforcement might change on the ground.

For residents in Epsom and Ewell, the announcement signals political momentum on an issue that has generated long-standing concern, particularly with food delivery mopeds in the Epsom High Street area, but any practical change to enforcement will depend on the detail of the legislation and how quickly local authorities choose to act once the new framework is in place.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Image: Delivery moped on pavement in Epsom

Related reports:

Pavement Parking: Epsom & Ewell MP Speaks Out

Epsom and Ewell’s Local Democracy Debate: What’s at Stake as Consultation Enters Phase Two

16 January 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has launched the second stage of its Community Governance Review (CGR), inviting residents to give their views on whether two new parish-style bodies — Epsom Community Council and Ewell Community Council — should be created when the borough is abolished in 2027 under Surrey’s Local Government Reorganisation.

The consultation runs from 16 December 2025 to 1 February 2026. It proposes that the two new bodies would:

• cover the same geographic area as the present borough
• retain the existing 14 ward structure
• have two elected community councillors per ward
• levy a parish precept of around £43–£46 for a Band D household

If established, the new councils would initially be responsible for allotments and would act as statutory consultees on planning applications. Elections would be expected in May 2027.

The consultation takes place against the backdrop of the transition to the new East Surrey unitary authority, which from April 2027 will replace both borough and county councils across Epsom and Ewell, Tandridge, Reigate and Banstead, Mole Valley and Elmbridge.

The council states that while reorganisation “may open a number of opportunities”, it is also “mindful of the potential impact that losing a more local tier of governance may have for local residents in relation to local representation, resource allocation and priority of services.”

The consultation documents do not present alternative engagement models — such as Surrey County Council’s pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) — as response options, a point that several opposition councillors have since raised in correspondence with the Epsom and Ewell Times.

Support for Community Councils: Dalton argues democratic voice must be protected

In a detailed response to the Epsom and Ewell Times, Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA leader – Stoneleigh Ward) set out the

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Residents' Association case for progressing the consultation and exploring the creation of community councils.

She notes that Epsom and Ewell "is not alone" in carrying out such reviews, with similar work also under way in a number of other Surrey boroughs and districts. She states that 67% of respondents to the first consultation supported the proposal to investigate community councils further, and argues that residents should not be denied the opportunity to take part in this second and final consultation.

Cllr Dalton links the case for community councils to the scale of democratic change under the new East Surrey authority, writing that the reduction from 35 borough councillors and 5 county councillors to 10 unitary councillors represents "a 75% decrease in democratic representation," which she describes as "a compelling reason to explore introducing a local Community Council."

She describes the current proposal as a pragmatic starting point, with a modest precept that would fund administrative capacity and statutory planning consultation functions, while future roles could be agreed with the new unitary authority if appropriate.

Cllr Dalton also expresses scepticism about Surrey's pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees, stating that evidence from other reorganised areas suggests that such bodies "do not have the requisite powers or representation to deliver for the residents they represent."

Opposition concerns: cost, mandate and scope of responsibilities

Opposition councillors from the Independent, Liberal Democrat and Conservative groups have written separately to the Epsom and Ewell Times to set out their concerns.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) warns that while the consultation presents an initial Band D precept of around £45, costs could rise significantly if community buildings and major assets were later transferred to the new bodies. He argues that residents risk facing an "uncapped" additional tax burden if responsibility for high-maintenance assets is devolved in future years.

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) questions the proportionality of the financial model at this stage, highlighting that the only defined operational responsibility is allotment management, while the bulk of projected expenditure relates to administration rather than service delivery. He argues that residents are being asked to approve a structure whose long-term role and cost profile are not yet clear.

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) argues that the proposals recreate an additional layer of local government at a time when reorganisation is intended to simplify structures. She questions the value for money of establishing elected community councils when Surrey's Neighbourhood Area Committees are being piloted as a lower-cost forum for local voice and partnership working.

A number of opposition members also point to the relatively small number of responses to the first-stage consultation and argue that this does not amount to a clear mandate for creating new precept-raising bodies.

The letters from Councillors — published in full HERE on the Epsom and Ewell Times website — set out contrasting views on democratic representation, accountability, taxation and local identity in the new unitary era.

Neighbourhood Area Committees: an alternative model not included in the consultation

Surrey County Council's pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees are currently being evaluated after operating across four areas during 2025.

Surrey describes NACs as advisory partnership forums bringing together councillors, public services, voluntary and community organisations and residents to discuss local priorities. They do not have statutory powers or the ability to levy a precept, and have so far been delivered largely using existing staff resources and modest meeting costs.

Supporters of NACs argue that they provide a mechanism for local influence without creating a new tax-raising organisation. Supporters of community councils counter that advisory bodies cannot substitute for an elected local tier with formal status and statutory consultation rights.

The current CGR consultation does not invite residents to express a preference between these models.

See the Epsom and Ewell Times short guide to Neighbour Area Committees (NAC) HERE.

Participation, turnout and cost-benefit questions

The most recent full borough elections in May 2023 recorded an overall turnout of around 34% across Epsom and Ewell. Some opponents of the community council proposals question whether introducing an additional elected body represents good value where participation in local elections is already comparatively low.

Supporters respond that the reduction in democratic representation under the new unitary structure makes it more important, not less, to retain an additional tier through which residents can engage directly with locally-focused

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representatives.

The debate therefore continues to centre on differing conceptions of democratic voice, accountability and financial prudence during a period of structural change.

What happens next

The CGR consultation materials and questionnaire are available online and in hard copy at Epsom Town Hall, Bourne Hall, local libraries and the Community & Wellbeing Centre.

Public engagement events are scheduled for January, after which councillors will consider the consultation responses at a special meeting on or before 20 March 2026. At that meeting, the council will decide whether to make a Reorganisation Order to create the two new community councils.

Whatever the outcome, the decision will help shape how local representation, identity and civic life in Epsom and Ewell evolve as the borough approaches its transition into the new East Surrey authority in 2027.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell one of the most expensive places to own a home in the UK

16 January 2026



Residents in Epsom and Ewell could be spending the equivalent of more than four-fifths of a ***single*** average salary on mortgage repayments, according to a new affordability analysis published by property buying firm Sell House Fast. The study ranks Epsom and Ewell fourth among UK areas outside London for the proportion of “net annual pay” it estimates would be taken up by annual mortgage repayments, putting the figure at 82.2%.

The analysis combines earnings data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings with local average house prices from the UK House Price Index. It then models mortgage repayment costs by assuming a 20 per cent deposit and applying the Bank of England base rate. On that basis, Sell House Fast lists Epsom and Ewell with a median annual net pay of £35,380, an average house price of £560,957, and estimated annual mortgage repayments of £29,083.

Official figures suggest the house-price element of the estimate is broadly consistent with published data. ONS housing statistics show the average house price in Epsom and Ewell was around £556,000 in October 2025 (provisional), rising to about £570,000 for homes bought with a mortgage.

Housing analysts caution, however, that figures of this kind are highly sensitive to assumptions. The analysis does not describe what existing homeowners in Epsom and Ewell actually pay each month, but instead models repayments using a fixed deposit level and an interest-rate assumption that may not reflect the mortgage products many households are on, particularly those who secured fixed-rate deals in earlier years. The Bank of England base rate has also changed several times over the past year, which can significantly affect illustrative repayment calculations.

It is also important to note that the comparison is based on the average net salary of a single individual. In practice, many mortgages in Epsom and Ewell are taken out jointly, with repayments shared between two wage earners, which can

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substantially alter affordability at the household level.

Even with these caveats, the analysis adds to wider evidence that Epsom and Ewell remains one of the least affordable areas in the South East when local incomes are set against local house prices, underlining the continued pressure faced by first-time buyers and households seeking to move within the borough.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Image: An Epsom Street – Google Maps

From Abramovich's frozen wealth to Epsom's Ashley Centre – support for Ukraine continues

16 January 2026



The Government has announced that £2.5 billion from the frozen proceeds of the sale of Chelsea Football Club by sanctioned Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich is to be directed towards humanitarian aid for Ukraine, following years of political and legal delay.

The money has been held in the UK since the forced sale of the football club in 2022, after Abramovich was sanctioned in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ministers have now confirmed that the funds will be transferred to a foundation dedicated to humanitarian support for Ukraine, with legal action threatened if the process is not completed.

Helen Maguire, Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom and Ewell, welcomed the decision, describing it as "long-overdue action" and a step towards accountability. She said billions of pounds linked to sanctioned Russian oligarchs had remained frozen while Ukrainians continued to suffer the consequences of what she described as Putin's illegal war, and that she would continue to press the Government to ensure the money reaches Ukraine swiftly.

While £2.5 billion is a significant sum, it represents only a small proportion of the overall cost of the war's impact on Ukraine. According to the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Commission and the Ukrainian government, the estimated cost of recovery and reconstruction in Ukraine now stands at around $524 billion over the next decade. That figure includes widespread destruction of housing, hospitals, schools, energy infrastructure and transport networks, alongside the long-term costs of healthcare, rehabilitation, psychological trauma and landmine clearance.

Direct physical damage to infrastructure alone is estimated at more than $170 billion, while millions of civilians have been displaced and tens of thousands injured. The long-term health consequences of the war, including treatment for complex injuries and trauma, are expected to place a continuing burden on Ukraine's public services for many years. Against that backdrop, the Abramovich funds amount to well under one per cent of the estimated total cost of rebuilding, though they could make a substantial difference to targeted humanitarian and medical programmes.

The announcement has renewed local focus on the role of Surrey Stands With Ukraine, a volunteer-run charity based in Epsom which has been providing humanitarian aid since the early weeks of the invasion. Operating under Harrop HR Missions Ltd, the group has sent more than 148 vanloads of aid to Ukraine and has supported both medical relief overseas and displaced Ukrainians in the UK. The charity has also been recognised in Parliament, with Helen Maguire MP praising its work in providing medical aid and rehabilitation support.

For nearly four years, Surrey Stands With Ukraine has maintained a highly visible permanent kiosk in the Ashley Centre near Waitrose, which volunteers describe as central to sustaining donations, public awareness and community engagement. The kiosk is due to close permanently on 1 January 2026 following a change in the Ashley Centre's policy on charity fundraising.

Under the new arrangements, Surrey Stands With Ukraine has been selected as one of a small number of charities allowed to operate a branded market stall inside the centre for limited periods each month. From January 2026, the charity will operate a stall near the soon to open Primark on a restricted schedule, typically four days per month. Physical donations will continue to be accepted at the charity's Ukraine Hub in Global House, accessed via the rear entrance to the Ashley Centre.

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Surrey Stands With Ukraine will operate a fundraising and information stall inside the Ashley Centre on the following dates in 2026. The stall will be located near Primark.

January: Tuesday 6, Thursday 8, 15 and 22
February: Tuesday 3, Thursday 5, 19 and 26
March: Tuesday 3, Thursday 5, 19 and 26
April: Tuesday 7, Thursday 9, 16 and 30
May: Tuesday 5, Thursday 7, 14 and 21
June: Tuesday 2 and 16; Thursday 4 and 11
July: Tuesday 7, Thursday 9, 16 and 30
August: Tuesday 4, Thursday 6, 13 and 20
September: Tuesday 1, Thursday 3, 10 and 17
October: Tuesday 6, Thursday 8 and 15

Physical donations can also be made at the Surrey Stands With Ukraine Hub in Global House, accessed via the rear entrance of the Ashley Centre by pressing the “Ukraine Hub” buzzer.

The loss of a permanent stand is expected to reduce income by around £30,000 a year and significantly limit the collection of physical aid. A spokesperson for SSWU stated the daily presence allowed volunteers to build relationships with regular donors and served as a constant reminder of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

The Ashley Centre provides Surrey Stands With Ukraine with a suite of rooms and storage space in Global House, Ashley Avenue. The premises also are home to the Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network and is known as the “Ukraine Hub”. Previously a retail unit facing the mall was used by SSWU until the unit was re-let commercially. The Ashley Centre has not responded to questions from the Epsom and Ewell Times about the decision to remove the permanent kiosk.

Surrey Stands With Ukraine thanks the Ashley Centre for its ongoing support and confirmed it will continue its work, stressing that the reduction in visibility makes public backing more important than ever. The charity says it is exploring alternative ways to maintain a visible presence in Epsom town centre and is encouraging residents to visit the new stall dates in the Ashley Centre and to continue donating through the Global House hub.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly warned that Russia’s war against Ukraine is not an isolated conflict but a direct threat to the security of the whole of Europe, arguing that Moscow’s actions demonstrate a willingness to use military force to pursue imperial ambitions beyond its borders. Sustaining humanitarian support for Ukraine is essential in maintaining civilian morale, stressing that resilience among the Ukrainian population is a decisive factor in resisting aggression and deterring further expansionism by President Vladimir Putin.

The contrast between the scale of national and international funding announcements and the challenges faced by local charities has highlighted the continued reliance on community-level support to meet urgent humanitarian needs. While the release of frozen oligarch assets has been widely welcomed, organisations working on the ground say sustained public engagement remains essential as the war and its consequences continue.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Since the war began the 14th Ukraine Social and Music Evening will take place at the Epsom Methodist Church this Saturday 20th December. Helen Maguire MP will welcome guests and performers. See listing here for details.

Related reports:

Sir Ed supporting Epsom based Ukraine charities

Epsom Stands in Solidarity with Ukraine on War’s Third Anniversary

Epsom MP leads cross-party delegation to Ukraine to examine impact of explosive weapons

Fire Assembly for Ukraine

2 years on Epsom to gather in solidarity with Ukraine

Image: Abramovich – licensed HERE. Credit: IAN KINGTON / AFP / picturedesk.com. Ashley Centre entrance – Google Maps

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Surrey countryside campaigners warn new planning rules risk more speculative development

16 January 2026

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Local countryside campaigners have voiced strong concerns over the Government's newly announced changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), warning that the reforms could increase speculative development across Surrey without delivering the affordable housing and infrastructure communities need.

The changes, announced by the Housing Minister this week, form part of the Government's wider pledge to accelerate housebuilding and address England's housing shortage. Ministers say the revised framework is intended to simplify the planning system, reduce delays, and ensure local authorities play a more active role in meeting housing need.

Among the key changes outlined by the Government are a renewed emphasis on meeting housing targets, revisions to how land supply is assessed, and proposals to allow some areas of the Green Belt to be reclassified as so-called "grey belt" land where development is judged to have limited environmental or landscape value. Ministers have also argued that the reforms will reduce repeated legal challenges and appeals that, they say, slow down development.

Responding to the announcement, CPRE Surrey said it was "deeply concerned" that the changes would fail to meet their stated aims while placing greater pressure on countryside land.

Andy Smith of CPRE Surrey said the proposals were "unlikely to meet the Government's aim of speeding up housebuilding but will certainly blight more of our countryside with the shadow of unwanted development".

"Yes, we need more affordable housing but these proposals won't achieve that," he said. "What we will see is a further increase in speculative development which boosts the profits of developers but will not produce the housing or public services that we really need."

CPRE Surrey has questioned why the Government is pursuing development on Green Belt land when national figures indicate there is capacity for at least 1.4 million new homes on brownfield sites across England. Campaigners argue that the absence of a legally enforceable "Brownfield First" policy means developers will continue to prioritise greenfield sites, where land values are higher and projects are more commercially attractive.

"Why, when across England there is space for at least 1.4 million new homes on brownfield sites, does the Government still want to reclassify much of the Green Belt as 'grey belt' and build on it?" Mr Smith asked. "Why do Ministers want us to lose farmland and open spaces to the developers?"

The Government has also said the changes are intended to prevent repeated attempts to overturn planning decisions. In Parliament, the Housing Minister said the reforms would help end a system that allows parties to "come back again and again if they don't get the outcome they want".

CPRE Surrey disputes that characterisation, arguing that it is developers, not local communities, who benefit from repeated appeals. Mr Smith said that if a planning application is approved by a Surrey council, local residents generally have no right of appeal, whereas developers can submit multiple revised applications or appeals following refusals.

"Developers can indeed 'come back again and again' with appeals and revised, often barely changed, planning applications, aiming to wear down the objectors," he said. "The proportion of legal challenges brought by local communities is tiny compared to the number of developments that are pushed through."

While ministers insist the revised NPPF will streamline decision-making and unlock new housing supply, CPRE Surrey said it could not see how the changes would genuinely speed up development or improve outcomes for communities.

"All these changes will do is play into the hands of speculative developers," Mr Smith said.

The revised National Planning Policy Framework is expected to guide planning decisions across England once formally adopted, with local authorities required to update their planning policies in line with the new national framework.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Image: View of development land west from Hookwood, Horley. (Credit: Google Street View)

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A year in the life of Epsom’s Deputy Lieutenant Mary Zoeller

16 January 2026



From scout band concerts to royal visits, the past year has offered **Epsom** resident **Mary Zoeller** a front-row view of some of Surrey’s most inspiring community activity. Appointed a Deputy Lieutenant of Surrey in 2023, Mary Zoeller is now well into the rhythm of a role that quietly connects the Crown with everyday life across the county — celebrating voluntary service, youth achievement and civic endeavour.

Based in Epsom, where she has lived for 33 years, Mary Zoeller was asked to take on the role in part because of her long-standing involvement with the voluntary sector, particularly youth organisations. “I was honoured to be asked to support the Lord-Lieutenant as one of his Deputy Lieutenants,” she said. “My location of Epsom and my connections with the voluntary sector were some of the reasons I was approached.”

An ancient office with a modern purpose

The Lieutenancy is one of the oldest institutions in county life. The role of Lord-Lieutenant was created by King Henry VIII, originally to act as the Monarch’s personal representative and organise local defence. While the military function has long since disappeared, the modern Lieutenancy plays a vital civic role.

In Surrey, the Lord-Lieutenant — currently Michael More-Molyneux — represents the Sovereign at major events, supports Royal visits, promotes voluntary service and recognises achievement through honours and awards. He is supported by a team of Deputy Lieutenants (DLs), drawn from across the county to reflect Surrey’s diversity of place, background and experience.

Deputy Lieutenants deputise for the Lord-Lieutenant at engagements across Surrey and may be appointed for a fixed term, typically five years, or serve until the age of 75.

On the ground across Surrey

Over the past year, Mrs Zoeller has represented the Surrey Lieutenancy at a wide range of events, many focused on young people and volunteers.

Highlights have included attending the 1st Claygate Scout and Guide Band Concert, the Elmbridge Junior Citizen event, and a Chief Scout’s Gold Award presentation evening, where she met young people being recognised for exceptional commitment and leadership.

One particularly notable occasion saw her escort HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh during a visit to Brooklands Museum for an International Space Station live contact, linking local students with astronauts in orbit.

Reflecting on her experiences, Mary Zoeller said she has been repeatedly struck by the scale of voluntary effort across the county. “I have met volunteers who have astonished me with their commitment and passion for the organisations they represent,” she said.

Epsom connection

Although born in Bookham, Mary Zoeller has made Epsom her home for more than three decades and remains closely connected to the town’s community life. Her contribution has already been recognised locally, including being named one of Epsom & Ewell’s Coronation Champions in 2023.

Asked whether she wished to comment on questions of Surrey identity in the context of local government reorganisation, Mary Zoeller was clear that this would not be appropriate in her official capacity. “It would be my personal opinion and not that of the Surrey Lieutenancy,” she said.

As she enters another year as a Deputy Lieutenant, Mary Zoeller’s experience offers a glimpse into a role that is largely unseen but deeply woven into the county’s civic fabric — quietly celebrating service, commitment and community across Surrey.

Sam Jones – Reporter

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Photo: Deputy Lieutenant Mary Zoeller at Gold awards for Chief Scouts

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Epsom & Ewell’s Coronation Champion

Derby Prize Money to Rise to £2m as Epsom Seeks to Reassert Its Place at the Top of British Racing

16 January 2026



The Derby at Epsom is set to regain its position at the very summit of British flat racing after The Jockey Club confirmed that prize money for the 2026 renewal will rise to £2 million, making it the joint-richest race in the UK.

The £500,000 uplift takes the Derby’s total prize fund to £2 million, with £1 million awarded to the winner, placing the race on a par with Ascot’s King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes, long regarded as Britain’s most valuable middle-distance contest.

The announcement comes after a six-month review by Epsom Downs Racecourse and The Jockey Club, prompted by a notable fall in attendance at this year’s Derby meeting. Official figures show the Derby crowd dropped by more than 4,500, from over 26,800 in 2024 to 22,312 in 2025, raising concerns about the long-term appeal of Britain’s most famous Classic.

A race whose prestige once eclipsed prize money

Historically, the Derby’s importance has never rested on prize money alone. For much of its 245-year history, victory at Epsom carried unparalleled breeding and reputational value, dwarfing the cash rewards on offer.

Well into the late twentieth century, the Derby paid significantly less than major jumps races such as the Grand National or Cheltenham Gold Cup, yet remained the race every owner, trainer and breeder wanted to win. A Derby victory could transform a colt’s value overnight, securing a lucrative stud career that far exceeded any prize cheque.

In recent decades, however, that imbalance has begun to shift. With global investment in racing concentrated increasingly in prize money-led jurisdictions such as Ireland, France, Australia and the Middle East, British racing has faced mounting pressure to compete financially as well as historically.

How the Derby now compares

At £2 million, the Derby will now sit at the top tier of UK racing alongside:

- **King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes (Ascot)** – £2 million
- **The Derby (Epsom)** – £2 million from 2026

By comparison:

- **Cheltenham Gold Cup** currently offers prize money in the region of £625,000
- **The Grand National**, Britain’s most famous jumps race, has a total prize fund of £1 million
- **The Oaks**, run on the Friday of the Derby meeting, remains below the Derby but continues to hold major Classic status

The uplift therefore restores a sense of hierarchy at the very top of British flat racing, ensuring that the Derby once again leads from the front rather than trailing its peers.

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Wider changes to the Derby meeting

Prize money is not the only area where change is planned. In an effort to attract a younger and more diverse audience, under-18s will be given free entry to both days of the Derby meeting in 2026. Racecourse officials hope this will help introduce a new generation to Epsom Downs and to racing more generally.

There are also significant changes to the structure of the meeting itself. The **Coronation Cup** will move from Friday to Saturday, where it will be run alongside the Derby. Its prize money has more than doubled, rising from £450,000 to £1 million following new sponsorship from leading racehorse breeders Coolmore.

Across the two-day meeting as a whole, total prize money will increase by £1.375 million, while the **Oaks** will remain the feature race on the Friday.

A response to changing times

The changes follow a 2025 Derby won by **Lambourn**, trained by Aidan O'Brien, who recorded a record-extending 11th victory in the Classic. While the quality of racing on the track remains undiminished, the attendance figures suggest Epsom is grappling with wider challenges facing British racing: competition from other sports, rising costs for racegoers, and shifting leisure habits.

By restoring the Derby's financial standing, restructuring the meeting, and lowering barriers to entry for younger fans, Epsom Downs is clearly attempting to balance tradition with modern realities.

Whether higher prize money alone can reverse attendance trends remains to be seen. But with the Derby once again sitting at the very top of the British racing prize-money tree, Epsom is making a clear statement of intent: that the world's greatest flat race should also be one of its most valuable.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Horses racing Image: Credit Paul. CC BY 2.0

Epsom mural project to celebrate neurodiversity

16 January 2026



A major new public art project celebrating neurodiversity is planned for Epsom, led by local autistic artist **Marcele Silvina Rodrigues White**, following support from the rail operator and council to create a large mural close to Epsom railway station.

The mural, expected to be painted in late spring or early summer next year, aims to raise awareness of neurodiversity while celebrating inclusive artistic expression. It will involve artists who are autistic, neurodivergent, and disabled, with the project designed to give visibility to artists who often face barriers within the mainstream art world.

Marcele, who has lived in Epsom for the past seven years, said the project is both personal and community-focused. After moving from London, she describes settling in Epsom as "coming home", drawn by its green spaces, calm rhythm of life and supportive community. It was in Epsom, five years ago, that she began painting and started the artistic journey that has since taken her work across the UK and internationally.

An autistic artist and curator, Marcele has exhibited widely, including in London, Greece, New York and Rome. In 2024 her work was shown internationally, including at an exhibition organised by DaisY at The Lightbox in Woking and later at the Dantebus Art Gallery in Rome. She subsequently exhibited at Art Expo in New York and was invited to present her work in France at a special event organised by Fondazione Effeto Arte.

Alongside her own practice, Marcele has focused on creating platforms for other artists. In March 2025 she launched *Evoking Connections*, her own exhibition and arts initiative, at Horton in Epsom. The event brought together autistic, neurodivergent and disabled artists with the aim of raising awareness of neurodiversity and celebrating difference

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through creativity. Further editions followed at venues including Art & Grind in Guildford and Caballo Lounge in Epsom, with participating artists including those with multiple sclerosis, wheelchair users, autistic artists and neurotypical contributors.

More recently, Marcele was selected as one of the curators for the DaisY-Chain network, which supports artists in the spectrum and artists with different kinds of disabilities. She also shares her artwork and advocacy through her Instagram page, *thoughts_art_poem*.

The planned Epsom mural will reflect these values, with design approval forming part of the next stage of the project. The rail operator has expressed enthusiasm for the proposal and may also provide financial support, subject to confirmation. Images from Marcele's previous work will be used to accompany coverage of the project, and a group photograph of Marcele with participating artists will form part of the public launch.

Marcele said she hopes the mural will not only brighten a prominent public space, but also help challenge perceptions around disability and neurodiversity. "I understand the transformative power that art can have in our lives," she said. "I want others to experience that same sense of expression, connection and empowerment."

Further details about the mural design and painting dates are expected to be confirmed in the coming months.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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