Geography Squadron celebrates 70 years in Ewell

In a ceremony held on Saturday 15th March in **Ewell** the **135 Geographic Squadron Royal Engineers** commemorated their 70th anniversary at **Mercator House** (off Welbeck Close) by unveiling the first Ordnance Survey (OS) benchmark in over 25 years. This event not only celebrates the squadron's longstanding presence in Ewell but also highlights their historic ties with the OS, dating back to 1791.

A Legacy of Geographic Excellence

Established in 1948, the 135 Geographic Squadron has evolved into a pivotal Army Reserve unit, providing comprehensive geographic support to UK Defence operations. Their expertise encompasses surveying, terrain analysis, and the production and distribution of vital geographic materials. Over the years, squadron members have been deployed to various operational theatres, including Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and the Balkans, underscoring their critical role in supporting military operations.

The Significance of Ordnance Survey Benchmarks

Ordnance Survey benchmarks are physical markers that denote height above Ordnance Datum Newlyn, the standard reference point for elevation in mainland Great Britain. Traditionally etched onto enduring structures like buildings or bridges, these benchmarks have been integral to accurate mapping and surveying. However, with advancements in technology, the maintenance of these physical markers has ceased, making the recent installation at Mercator House particularly noteworthy.

Ceremonial Unveiling at Mercator House

The unveiling ceremony featured a parade by current squadron members and veterans, symbolizing the enduring camaraderie and dedication within the unit. Nick Bolton, Director General and CEO of Ordnance Survey, officiated the event, reflecting on the deep-rooted connection between OS and the 135 Geographic Squadron. He remarked, "I am proud to unveil such a permanent monument to the deep connection between Ordnance Survey and 135 Geographic Squadron."

The Officer Commanding 135 Geographic Squadron said: "This has been a fantastic opportunity for the Squadron to mark this significant milestone within the community of Epsom and Ewell. It also recognises the remarkable role OS Reservists played in our Squadron's early years and the deep geographic links that exist with OS today."

A Shared History: OS and Military Collaboration

The relationship between Ordnance Survey and the military is deeply entrenched in history. The OS's origins trace back to the 18th century when Major-General William Roy initiated a detailed survey of the Scottish Highlands, laying the groundwork for modern mapping techniques. This collaboration has persisted through significant historical events, with OS providing essential geospatial data during both World Wars and continuing to support military operations and national resilience efforts in contemporary times.

The establishment of the new benchmark at Mercator House not only honours the squadron's past achievements but also signifies a commitment to ongoing excellence in geographic support. As technological advancements continue to transform mapping and surveying, the enduring partnership between Ordnance Survey and the 135 Geographic Squadron Royal Engineers remains a cornerstone of the UK's defence infrastructure.

This commemorative event serves as a testament to the squadron's dedication and the pivotal role of accurate geographic information in safeguarding the nation.

Image: 135 Survey Engineer Regiment training in the 1950s

Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey: Key Proposals

The leaders of all 12 Surrey councils have reached an agreement on the fundamental principles for an interim proposal concerning local government reorganisation (LGR) within the county. The proposal, which follows a government directive issued in February, outlines the potential restructuring of Surrey's local government into either two or three unitary authorities.

Dividing Surrey: Two or Three Unitaries?

While Surrey County Council has advocated for the creation of two unitary councils, the majority of the district and borough councils favour a three-unitary model. The proposal has now been submitted to the government, which will decide whether to pursue one of these options further before a final business case is due in May. A government decision on the restructuring is anticipated in the autumn.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, expressed his confidence in the two-unitary approach, stating:

"I am clear that two unitary councils would bring the most benefits for Surrey's residents. It would create a simpler model of local government that is more efficient, offers better value for money and improved outcomes for all."

He also highlighted the potential for devolution under this model, allowing for the election of a mayor who could secure additional powers and funding for Surrey.

However, the vast majority of district and borough councils, including Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, have shown strong support for a three-unitary model. Hannah Dalton, Chair of Surrey Leaders Group and Leader of the Residents Association ruling group in Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, remarked:

"The leaders of Surrey's councils have been meeting weekly to discuss how local government will be structured here in Surrey. Later today, district and borough councils will publish a report outlining potential options on what form local government reorganisation may take, which will include scenarios for two and three unitary councils. The vast majority of the 11 districts and boroughs are supporting three unitaries."

Dalton emphasised the importance of securing the best possible outcome for Surrey's residents, reaffirming the commitment of local councils to work collaboratively in developing the final proposal.

Financial and Structural Implications

The recently released $Interim\ Plan\ -\ Part\ B$ provides a high-level analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.

Two Unitary Councils:

- Would create larger, more financially sustainable authorities (populations between 500,000 and 600,000 each).
- Would align with government criteria for devolution and financial sustainability.
- Risks include potential disruption in service delivery and the challenge of balancing financial stability between the two authorities.

Three Unitary Councils:

- Would offer more localised governance, aligning with existing borough and district identities.
- Could weaken financial resilience due to smaller council tax bases and greater complexity in disaggregating existing services.
- Risks include higher long-term costs and potential for economic disparity between wealthier and less affluent areas.

According to the financial appraisal, the three-unitary option is expected to be the most expensive to implement and least likely to meet government criteria for financial sustainability.

Next Steps and Government Decision

The submission of the interim proposals on 21st March marks the first step in the government's review process. Local councils across Surrey are set to hold **Extraordinary Council Meetings** in the coming weeks to discuss and note the submission.

A full business case is required by 9th May, and consultations with residents, businesses, and stakeholders will continue in the interim period. Surrey's final decision will ultimately rest with central government, which is expected to announce its verdict in the autumn.

The coming months will determine whether the vision of two or three unitary authorities prevails and what the reorganisation will mean for local governance, service delivery, and financial sustainability across Surrey.

Stay updated with the Epsom and Ewell Times for ongoing coverage of the local government reorganisation process.

Related reports:

Could Woking's debt be shared by you after reorganisation?

An independent view on Epsom and Ewell Council's future

Local Labour view on Epsom and Ewell Council's future

Local LibDem view on Epsom and Ewell Council's future

Epsom and Ewell Local Plan Submitted for Examination

Residents Encouraged to Stay Engaged and Make Representations

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has officially submitted the Epsom and Ewell Local Plan (2022-2040) to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for independent examination. This significant step, taken on 10 March 2025, means that an Inspector will now be appointed by the Government to assess whether the Plan meets legal compliance and soundness criteria under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2023.

The Local Plan, which will shape the development of the borough for the next 15 years, has already undergone public consultation between 20 December 2024 and 5 February 2025 as part of the Regulation 19 Proposed Submission process. The appointed Inspector will consider the representations made during this period as part of the examination.

What Happens Next?

A Programme Officer, Charlotte Glancy, has been appointed to facilitate the examination process. Independent of the Council, she will manage all procedural and administrative matters, acting as the point of contact between the Inspector, Council officers, and those who submitted representations.

Anyone who requested to appear at the examination hearings will be contacted by the Programme Officer in due course regarding the issues the Inspector wishes to explore further and the relevant hearing dates.

How to Access the Local Plan Documents

Residents who wish to review the submitted Local Plan and supporting documents can access them online at the Council's Local Plan Examination webpage: https://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/localplanexamination.

Hard copies of key documents are available for public inspection at the following locations:

- **Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Offices** (Town Hall, The Parade, Epsom, KT18 5BY) Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm
- **Epsom Library** (6 Epsom Square, KT19 8AG) Monday, Wednesday, Friday: 9.30am-5.30pm; Tuesday, Thursday: 9.30am-7pm; Saturday: 9.30am-5pm
- Ewell Library (Bourne Hall, Spring Street, KT17 1UF) Tuesday to Saturday, 9.30am-5pm
- Ewell Court Community Library (Ewell Court House, Lakehurst Road, KT19 0EB) Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday: 10am-5pm; Saturday: 10am-4pm
- **Stoneleigh Community Library** (1 Stoneleigh Broadway, KT17 2JA) Monday, Tuesday, Friday: 10am-1pm, 2pm-5pm; Thursday: 10am-1pm; Saturday: 10am-4pm

Residents should check the library opening times before attending, as they may be subject to change. For enquiries about library access, contact Surrey County Council at 03456 009 009.

Making Representations and Further Enquiries

Those with queries regarding the Local Plan examination process should direct them to Programme Officer Charlotte Glancy:

■ Email: bankssolutionsuk@gmail.com

■ **Telephone:** 01903 776601 / 07519 628064

■ Postal Address: C/O Banks Solutions, 80 Lavinia Way, East Preston, West Sussex, BN16 1DD

For general information on the Local Plan, residents can contact the Planning Policy Team at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council:

■ Email: localplan@epsom-ewell.gov.uk

■ **Telephone:** 01372 732000

This is a crucial stage in the Local Plan's development, and residents who have previously submitted comments or have an interest in the borough's future planning policies are encouraged to stay informed and involved in the process. The examination will determine the Plan's suitability in guiding local development, housing, infrastructure, and environmental policies up to 2040.

Related reports:

The Local Plan plot thickens after revised NPPF

Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in

Epsom and Ewell's Draft Local Plan goes to Full Council

and many more..... search "Local Pan"

Epsom and Ewell's Record-Breaking Poppy Appeal

The **Royal British Legion**'s Epsom and Ewell branch has once again demonstrated the remarkable generosity of the local community, raising a record-breaking total of £79,366.99 during the 2024 Poppy Appeal. This astounding figure, collected throughout the borough in November, marks an increase of £16,000 from the previous year—an incredible achievement as collectors and supporters returned in full force after the pandemic.

Poppy Appeal Organiser **Amy Johnson**, alongside her dedicated deputies, coordinated an army of volunteers, young and old, who braved the autumn chill to collect donations across the **Ashley Centre**, **Sainsbury's Kiln Lane**, **local schools**, **shops**, **businesses**, **and various poppy stands** throughout Epsom and Ewell. The generosity of local residents ensured that the borough, known for its strong community spirit, once again surpassed expectations.

A special note of thanks goes to the **Ashley Centre and Sainsbury's Kiln Lane management teams**, whose continued support provided vital collection points for this year's appeal.

Reflecting on the significance of the funds raised, Barb Warwick, Chair of RBL Epsom and Ewell, stated:

"As we sadly say farewell to the last of our WWII service men and women, our mission now is to ensure that the new generation of Armed Forces personnel and their families receive the support they need, no matter where or when they serve. We are secure in the knowledge that Epsom and Ewell, the smallest borough with the biggest heart, will rise to this challenge."

The Royal British Legion continues its vital work providing welfare and support to serving and former members of the Armed Forces and their families. Anyone in need of assistance, whether they have served in the past or are currently in the Armed Forces, is encouraged to reach out to **barb.warwick@virginmedia.com** for confidential support and guidance.

With the borough's unwavering dedication, Epsom and Ewell have once again shown their commitment to remembering and supporting those who have served. Lest we forget.

Epsom Runner's Tribute to Sister Raises Over £22,000 for Epilepsy Charity

An Epsom man has completed an extraordinary fundraising challenge in memory of his sister, raising more than £22,000 for national charity Epilepsy Action.

Barry Ahearn, from Epsom, ran **27 half-marathons** over the past year to honour his sister, Abbie, who tragically passed away in September 2023 following a severe epileptic seizure. Barry's challenge was deeply symbolic—each half-marathon representing **one minute of the 27 minutes** his sister's brain was without oxygen while paramedics fought to save her life.

His final run took place on **Saturday, 8th March, in Battersea Park**, where he was joined by **40 fellow runners** and **150 supporters**, including family, friends, and representatives from Epilepsy Action.

A Challenge Driven by Love and Loss

Reflecting on the challenge, Barry said:

"Losing Abbie has been the hardest thing I've ever experienced. She was kind, compassionate, and full of life. Every day since she passed, I've felt emotional pain—so I decided to match it with physical pain and push myself to do something in her memory."

Abbie was just **three months away from her 30th birthday** when she suffered a fatal seizure. Having been diagnosed with epilepsy only six weeks earlier, her death came as a devastating shock to her loved ones.

Barry's journey has taken him across the UK, completing half-marathons in **London, Carsington Water, and even at his local park**, where he ran up and down a single path **55 times** to complete the 21km distance. Some runs were part of organised events, while others were solo challenges that tested his mental and physical endurance.

Community Spirit and Support

Throughout his challenge, Barry was supported by his **wife Naomi**, who not only cheered him on at every race but also ran parts of the final half-marathon with him.

"Seeing my best friends, family, and their children cheering me on has been so special. The solo runs were tough emotionally, but I knew I had people behind me every step of the way."

His efforts have not only raised funds but also **heightened awareness of epilepsy**, a condition that affects **over 600,000 people in the UK**, with **three people dying from epilepsy-related causes every day**.

An Impact Beyond Fundraising

Barry's campaign has been hailed as a remarkable achievement by **Epilepsy Action's Director of Fundraising, Philippa Cartwright**, who praised his determination and resilience:

"Barry's efforts are truly inspiring. The funds he and his team have raised will help support vital services, from Talk & Support groups to our helpline, ensuring people with epilepsy get the help they need."

Barry hopes that his sister's story will encourage more people to learn about the risks associated with epilepsy and push for better awareness and research.

"When I started this challenge, I wanted to raise awareness and funds. I can't measure the full impact it's had, but if this helps save even one life, it will have been worth it."

How to Support the Cause

Barry's fundraising page remains open for donations to **Epilepsy Action**, which continues to campaign for better services and support for those affected by epilepsy.

To contribute to Barry's campaign, visit: JustGiving - Barry Ahearn's Fundraiser

For more information on epilepsy and support services, visit www.epilepsy.org.uk or call the Epilepsy Action helpline on 0808 800 5050.

The Battle of Waterloo Road development

The Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Planning Committee has unanimously rejected a controversial proposal for a 12-unit residential development on Waterloo Road. Councillors cited concerns over poor design, excessive height, a lack of affordable housing, and the absence of parking provision.

The meeting, held on 6th March 2025, was chaired by Councillor **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodocte and Langley)/The application sought outline planning permission to demolish an existing two-storey building and replace it with a four-storey block containing seven two-bedroom flats and five one-bedroom flats.

However, councillors raised significant objections, particularly regarding the design and scale of the project. The Planning Officer explained that while an earlier proposal for a smaller nine-unit scheme had been approved on appeal, this new application was substantially different. "The proposal would maximise the number of units on the site to the detriment of the local character of the area," he stated.

Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) was critical of the lack of parking provision, arguing that the development failed to consider residents with mobility issues. "More and more homes are becoming a complete barrier to people because they need a car to actually exist," she said.

Councillor **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) praised the planning officers' report, calling it "one of the best" she had seen in her 20 years as a councillor. She also criticised the design, saying: "You either make something outstanding so people say 'wow', or you ensure it blends in so well that it is unobtrusive. This does neither."

Another major point of contention was the failure to meet the council's affordable housing policy. Under planning regulations, 20% of developments of this scale should be designated as affordable housing, yet the applicant had only proposed 5%. Councillor **Chris Watson** (RA Ewell Court) called this a "cynical application", adding: "Anyone can pick up the policy and read it. There is no excuse for submitting something that so blatantly disregards our requirements."

Concerns were also raised about the impact on neighbouring properties. The proposed development would result in significant overlooking, overshadowing, and loss of privacy for nearby homes. It also failed to meet national space standards for several of the proposed flats.

Following the discussion, Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) proposed that the application be refused, seconded by Councillor Muir. The committee then voted unanimously in favour of rejection.

Councillor **Humphrey Reynolds** (RA West Ewell) remarked on the pattern of previous applications for the site being refused, noting that even successful appeals had not led to development. "Clearly, the developers know this is not right," he said.

The applicant now has the option to revise the scheme and submit a new proposal or appeal the decision.

Image: EEBC papers showing overlooking of proposed 4 storey building over neighbouring properties

Epsom Ranks Among Surrey's Best for Train Punctuality

Epsom railway station has emerged as one of Surrey's most reliable stations for punctuality and service, faring significantly better than many other locations across the county. Despite serving three major London terminals—Victoria, Waterloo, and London Bridge—Epsom's train services remain relatively efficient, avoiding the severe delays and cancellations plaguing other areas.

Government Push for Greater Transparency

The government has announced plans to improve transparency in railway punctuality by introducing live data screens at major stations across the country, including in Surrey. These digital screens will display real-time statistics on train cancellations and punctuality, offering commuters a clearer picture of service reliability. Data will also be made available online.

 $The \ latest \ figures \ highlight \ significant \ differences \ in \ performance \ across \ Surrey's \ rail \ network. \ While \ some \ stations \ suffer \ from \ across \ Surrey's \ rail \ network.$

frequent delays and cancellations, Epsom continues to provide a more dependable service for its passengers.

Surrey's Worst-Offending Stations for Delays and Cancellations

Several stations in Surrey have been identified as the worst performers for punctuality and cancellations, frustrating thousands of daily commuters. At the bottom of the list is Woking, where only 72.2% of non-cancelled trains arrive 'on time'—defined as arriving within three minutes of schedule. Just above it, Guildford fares only slightly better at 74.2%.

Other stations in the lowest 10 for punctuality include:

- **Guildford** 74.2%
- **Horley** 74.8%
- **Gomshall** 74.8%
- **Haslemere** 75.2%
- **Reigate** 75.6%
- **Dorking (Deepdene)** 76.4%
- **Byfleet and New Haw** 76.6%
- **Earlswood** 76.7%
- **Redhill** 77%

Some of these stations also struggle with cancellations, with Earlswood topping the list, where 11.7% of all scheduled trains simply do not arrive. This is followed by Salfords (11.7%) and Horley (8.4%). The full list of worst stations for cancellations is as follows:

- **Earlswood** 11.7%
- **Salfords** 11.7%
- **Horley** 8.4%
- Kempton Park Racecourse 7.4%
- **Sunbury** 7.3%
- **Upper Halliford** 7.3%
- **Chilworth** 6.8%
- **Redhill** 6.6%
- **Shepperton** 6.6%
- **Gomshall** 6.5%

Epsom's Strong Performance

If Epsom were included in these rankings, it would rank significantly higher in reliability. The latest figures show that **87.7%** of its non-cancelled trains arrive on time or within three minutes, a notably strong performance compared to its Surrey counterparts. Additionally, the station has a low cancellation rate of just **1.6%**, offering passengers greater confidence in their daily commutes.

Natasha Grice, Director at Transport Focus, welcomed the initiative to improve the transparency of service reliability, stating: "Passengers tell us they want a reliable, on-time train service and will welcome improvements to information about the punctuality of their service and cancellations being shared more transparently. It's important that the industry uses this information to drive up performance."

Meanwhile, Woking MP Will Forster has launched a new cross-party group aimed at holding South Western Railway accountable for poor performance. "I'm disappointed but sadly not surprised Woking suffers from more delays than any other station in Surrey," he said. "My constituents in Woking, and passengers right across the South Western Railway network, deserve a fair

deal as they travel by train. We should expect cheaper and more reliable services."

A Positive Outlook for Epsom Commuters

While many Surrey stations struggle with delays and cancellations, Epsom's strong performance provides a welcome relief for local commuters. The government's move to display live data at stations will allow passengers to make more informed travel choices and hold operators accountable. As the debate around rail service reliability continues, Epsom's efficiency stands out as a positive example in an otherwise challenging landscape for rail users across Surrey.

Woodland Trust in Epsom and Ewell paradox

The Woodland Trust (WT) has highlighted that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) is among the majority of local councils yet to declare a nature emergency or establish a dedicated nature recovery action plan. According to WT, EEBC has not embedded nature recovery into its policies nor committed to managing 30% of council land for nature recovery by 2030.

Ironically, within the borough of Epsom and Ewell lies Langley Vale Wood, one of the UK's four First World War Centenary Woods, and the sole representative for England. Owned and managed by the Woodland Trust, this expansive woodland spans approximately 259 hectares (641 acres) and features pockets of ancient woodland, diverse wildlife, and panoramic views over the North Downs.

Established as a living memorial to those who sacrificed their lives during the First World War, Langley Vale Wood stands as a testament to the importance of nature conservation and biodiversity. The site was purchased by the Woodland Trust in 2014 and has since seen the planting of around 180,000 trees.

Despite not having a standalone nature recovery action plan, EEBC has implemented biodiversity initiatives. The council is currently five years into its second ten-year Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which runs from 2020 to 2030. Councillor **Liz Frost**, (RA Woodcoate and Langley) Chair of the Environment Committee, emphasised the council's commitment to biodiversity:

"Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is five years into its second ten-year Biodiversity Action Plan. The current plan contains five objectives with 27 targets to support. It aims to ensure both the long-term protection and enhancement of biodiversity within our borough and prioritises our resources so that they are used effectively.

We work closely with local volunteers and partners to take action to support biodiversity in the borough. For example, last year we worked with the South East Rivers Trust to build a new Wetlands on the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve, which is helping to improve the water quality of the Hogsmill River. This is a globally-important chalk stream and is supporting biodiversity in the area, including species whose numbers have dwindled, such as water voles, fish and eels.

The council also has an in-house ecologist who scrutinises all planning applications and advises on their impact on biodiversity, and how any impact might be mitigated.

Another example of how biodiversity action is embedded in council strategy can be found in the Proposed Submission Local Plan in which, following the Regulation 18 consultation, we included increased energy efficiency standards for new homes and the allocation of additional sites in the urban area. The Council's Local Plan also contains specific policies relating to biodiversity and geodiversity which, once adopted, will require development to have regard to nature recovery, and to Surrey County Council's Local Nature Recovery Strategy once this has been adopted by Surrey."

EEBC has also adopted a five-year Climate Action Plan (2025-2029), approved by the Environment Committee in October 2024. While EEBC has not formally declared a nature emergency, its biodiversity and climate strategies indicate a commitment to environmental sustainability. The council's involvement in Surrey's Local Nature Recovery Strategy further demonstrates its role in regional efforts to promote nature recovery.

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Epsom and Ewell Council Approves Public Spaces Protection Order for Borough-Wide Expansion

The Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Crime and Disorder Committee has voted to recommend the adoption of a borough-wide Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) following a public consultation that showed overwhelming community support.

The new PSPO, which will now be referred to Full Council for final approval, aims to tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB) by prohibiting a range of activities, including harassment, intimidation, verbal abuse, and alcohol consumption in public spaces after a warning from an authorised officer. The order also bans wearing face coverings, such as balaclavas, with the intent to commit ASB or crime, a measure police say will help deter group-related intimidation.

At the meeting, Public Protection Manager Oliver Nelson introduced the officers' report, highlighting the strong public backing for the PSPO. He noted that 92% of respondents supported extending the order for three years, and 83% backed its expansion across the entire borough. "The consultation has given us a clear steer from residents," he said. "We've slightly refined the prohibitions based on feedback, ensuring the PSPO is proportionate and enforceable."

Police representatives, including Acting Inspector Tommy Pearson and Chief Inspector Kelly Clifton-Sinclair, attended the meeting in support of the proposal.

Lib Dem Councillor **James Lawrence** (College) expressed his support, citing the consultation results as key to his decision. "Over 200 people responded to the consultation, with 92% of respondents supporting an extension to the PSPO and 83% supporting it covering the entire borough. My fellow Lib Dem councillors and I are happy to uphold public opinion on this and support the PSPO as proposed," he said.

However, some concerns were raised over the demographic spread of consultation responses. Councillor **Christine Howells** (RA Nonsuch) noted that only 2% of respondents were under the age of 24, questioning whether younger voices had been fully heard. In response, Committee Chair Councillor **Shanice Goldman (RA Nonsuch)** acknowledged the difficulty in securing wider engagement but highlighted outreach efforts to schools, faith groups, and youth charities, including Buddy Up, a mentoring programme for young people.

Councillor **Tony Froud** (RA Stoneleigh)sought clarification on the geographical scope of the PSPO, asking whether it applied to specific areas or the entire borough. Cllr Goldman confirmed that the order would be borough-wide, expanding upon previous PSPOs that only covered certain locations. "It's about making sure enforcement is not limited to certain hotspots," she explained.

The Committee also unanimously agreed to recommend a £100 fixed penalty for breaches (reduced to £80 if paid within 10 days). The PSPO will now go to Full Council for formal adoption, where it is expected to pass with broad support.

If approved, the borough-wide PSPO will be in place for three years, subject to review. Council officers have committed to a public awareness campaign, including new signage and social media outreach, to ensure residents are informed about the restrictions.

Sam Jones - Reporter

Image credits: Google and Tobias "ToMar" Maier Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0

Guildford Students protest against PSPOs

Surrey students have come out against a council's draft rules about public spaces, saying they could be "detrimental" to local students. Under the proposed new rules, students could be banned from being in a group of two or more people in the town centre which could "cause harassment, alarm or distress" to other people.

Guildford town centre has public space protection orders (PSPO) aimed at tackling persistent anti-social behaviour affecting others. Introduced in 2022, the rules are now up for review. Boundaries for the PSPO cover the town centre, Stoke Park and some neighbouring residential roads, the Mount (residential area and green open space), including Black Cat Alley.

But students at the University of Surrey have attacked the draft regulations as "vague" and have said that they can be "misinterpreted" in a way that can be harmful to students in Guildford.

Leading the cause, the Student Union's President Liam White said in a statement: "We are concerned by the overly conditional phrasing of 'acting in a manner that is likely to cause' and the vague nature of 'distress'. This feels like an extremely broad scope

to enforce, given that members of the public may potentially be 'distressed' when encountering young adults socialising in public, even if it is not disorderly or anti-social."

Under a PSPO, individuals deemed to be breaching the order can be asked to change their behaviour by police officers, PCSOs, or GBC compliance officers. Fines and written warnings can be given for repeated breaches.

He argued the PSPO is not phrased in a way which prevents groups acting disorderly but instead relies purely on a member of the public claiming to be distressed or alarmed. Mr White claimed this is "unreasonable" to potentially penalise members of the public, including students, in the town centre.

A spokesperson for Guildford Borough Council said: "We appreciate everyone who has taken time to respond to the Town Centre Public Spaces Protection Order consultation. These were draft proposals and the purpose of the consultation was to encourage feedback.

"In response to our partners and consultees, including the Student Union, we have adapted the proposed restrictions. The revised draft restrictions will be presented to the Executive on 27 March 2025 for consideration."

Other key concerns raised included how "rowdy and inconsiderate behaviour" could be defined by someone's clothing. The draft proposals state: "Wearing a piece of clothing with the intent to obscure or hide his/her identity for the purposes of committing crime and/or anti-social behaviour".

The Student Union said this is particularly concerning for members of the community who wear clothing that covers their face or hair for religious purposes. "We question how appropriate it is to be enforcing restrictions on clothing, rather than other indicators of anti-social behaviour," members said.

Students also criticised the proposed public space rules against the "anti-social" use of bicycles, skateboards and scooters in pedestrian areas. They said some of Guildford's community is already "resistant" to the Beryl Bikes scheme and extending the PSPO will "disincentivise people from using sustainable travel".

Emily Dalton

Concerns over secretive policing include Surrey

Surrey Police has been affected by a nationwide push by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to influence responses to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, raising concerns about transparency in local policing.

Newly obtained data from the BBC reveals that Surrey Police referred a total of 39 FOI and Environmental Information Regulation (EIR) requests to the NPCC's Central Referral Unit (CRU) between January and March 2024. This accounts for around 9.6% of all FOI and EIR requests received by the force in January, 8% in February, and 3.5% in March.

Of the 39 requests referred, six were classified as "mandatory referrals," a controversial category requiring police forces to consult with the CRU before disclosing certain types of information. Topics covered under these mandatory referrals include covert policing operations, counter-terrorism, and the use of controversial surveillance technology. Critics argue this process enables the NPCC to centralise control over information disclosure, effectively limiting the public's right to know.

Nationally, the CRU advised local police forces on 1,706 FOI requests in the first three months of 2024, a practice campaigners have labelled as "authoritarian censorship." In some cases, police forces that had initially disclosed information were later advised to retract their responses, with the CRU citing concerns about national security and reputational risks.

Surrey Police received 523 FOI and EIR requests over the three-month period, meaning one in 13 requests was referred for CRU advice. Transparency advocates argue that these figures highlight an increasing trend of policing secrecy, particularly in sensitive areas such as police surveillance, drug-related crime, and misconduct investigations.

Jake Hurfurt, head of research at Big Brother Watch, condemned the NPCC's role, stating: "Pressuring police forces to retract data disclosed in response to journalists' Freedom of Information requests, and instead trying to refuse to confirm or deny they hold the data, is the practice of an authoritarian censor, not an accountable public body."

While the NPCC insists it only provides guidance and does not dictate disclosure decisions, critics believe the process lacks accountability. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has previously taken action against multiple police forces for poor FOI performance, though Surrey Police has not been subject to specific regulatory action.

Current



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This revelation raises questions about whether Surrey residents are receiving the full picture when requesting information from their local police force. As scrutiny intensifies over the role of the NPCC in transparency matters, campaigners are calling for greater oversight to ensure that FOI laws serve the public interest rather than institutional secrecy.