

Surrey countryside campaigners warn new planning rules risk more speculative development

18 December 2025



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

18 December 2025



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



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

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

18 December 2025



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.

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

18 December 2025



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 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



Million-pound FIFA-standard football pitch opens at Glyn School in Ewell

18 December 2025



A new state-of-the-art FIFA-standard 3G football pitch and pavilion has been officially opened at Glyn School in Ewell after more than £1 million of investment from national and local partners.

The Premier League, The FA and the Government's Football Foundation contributed just over half of the total cost, with further funding from Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Your Fund Surrey (Surrey County Council) and the Epsom & Ewell Colts. The new pitch will be used by Glyn School, other GLF Schools, Epsom & Ewell Colts FC and the wider community.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Playing Pitch Strategy and Corporate Plan identified the need for high-quality sports provision to promote healthy lifestyles, widen participation and meet the needs of a growing population. With more than 1,800 students at Glyn and around 5,000 across other GLF Schools, the facilities are expected to make a significant daily impact on school and community sport.

A partnership with Epsom & Ewell Colts FC means the pitch will become a major hub for grassroots football, supporting over 1,200 players across 82 teams, including 30 girls' and women's teams. The GLF Schools Foundation will help expand access for disadvantaged groups, disabled players and young people historically underrepresented in sport, aligning with both borough and national priorities for community wellbeing.

The official opening took place on Wednesday (Dec 10), with GLF Schools Interim CEO James Nicholson addressing guests and the Mayor of Epsom & Ewell, **Cllr Robert Leach**, cutting the ribbon. Also present were Liz Pill from the Football Foundation and Rosanne Fine from Surrey Football Association. Visitors toured the pitch and pavilion after watching players take to the new surface.

Jo Garrod, Headteacher at Glyn School, said: "This new pitch and pavilion are a fantastic addition to the sports facilities at our school and will be a huge benefit to all our students. We're extremely grateful to the Football Foundation for the funding and investment and delighted that they have made such a significant contribution to improve the quality of sports

facilities for everyone in the community.”

James Nicholson, Interim CEO of GLF Schools, said: “The range of sports and activities we offer at GLF Schools is central to the educational experience for all students. Having the latest modern facilities is key to giving every student the best opportunities to reach their full potential and enjoy their time with us. I’d like to thank The Football Foundation, whose major grant made this development possible, Epsom & Ewell Council, Your Fund Surrey (Surrey County Council), and the Epsom & Ewell Colts, who also supported this project with substantial financial contributions. As well as Surrey FA for their strategic guidance and endorsement, and all the consultants in design, fundraising, planning, and project management who worked so hard to build such an impressive pitch and pavilion.”

Robert Sullivan, Chief Executive of the Football Foundation, said: “The Football Foundation is working closely with our partners, the Premier League, The FA and Government, to transform the quality of grassroots facilities in England by delivering projects like this across the country. Good quality playing facilities have a transformative impact on physical and mental health and play an important role in bringing people together and strengthening local communities. We’re delighted that the local community in Epsom and Ewell will now be able to enjoy all these benefits thanks to the new facilities at Glyn School.”

Epsom & Ewell MP Helen Maguire said: “The opening of this new pitch and pavilion at Glyn School is a real milestone for Ewell and the wider borough. It gives young people and local clubs a first-class space to train, play, and grow – and it strengthens the role that sport can play in building confidence and aspiration, as well as the improvements it can bring to both physical and mental health. I’m delighted to see this project completed and look forward to visiting soon.”

Many local clubs, organisations and community groups provided letters of support, including NESOT, Chelsea FC Foundation, Fetcham United FC, Active Surrey, Surrey Schools FA, Surrey Cricket Foundation and Tidy Keepers.

A 3G (Third Generation) astro pitch is an advanced artificial turf surface combining synthetic grass, sand and rubber infill to mimic natural turf, offering all-weather durability and consistent performance.

About the Football Foundation

The Football Foundation is the Premier League, The FA and the Government’s charity dedicated to delivering outstanding grassroots facilities. Since 2000 it has raised £1.3 billion to improve facilities nationwide, including 1,300 3G pitches, 15,000 grass pitches and 1,700 changing rooms, attracting an additional £1.5 billion in partnership funding. It works with local authorities, County FAs and community partners to create Local Football Facility Plans for every area of England. More information at footballfoundation.org.uk.

About GLF Schools

GLF Schools is a multi-academy trust of 43 schools serving more than 17,000 pupils aged 2 to 19 across Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Hampshire, Surrey, West Sussex and parts of London. The Trust includes eight secondary schools and 35 primary settings, each serving its own community while sharing a commitment to excellent educational outcomes.

Sam Jones – Reporter



New Pitch at Glyn School x 2. Credit: GLF Schools

Public of Epsom and Ewell to be asked if they want two new Councils

18 December 2025



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has voted to continue exploring the creation of two new community councils—one for Epsom and one for Ewell—following an often heated debate at the Full Council meeting on Tuesday 9 December. The decision means the proposals will now go to a second phase of public consultation before a final vote in March 2026.

The meeting also saw **Cllr Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) elected—by 17 votes to 11—over **Cllr Alex Coley**

(Independent Ruxley) as the Borough's representative on a Local Government Association forum related to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

The main item of the night, however, was whether to progress the Community Governance Review (CGR) and consult residents further on the proposed new parish-style councils.

What was decided

Two recommendations were voted on separately, both by recorded vote:

- Recommendation 1: Proceed to a second-stage consultation
- Recommendation 2: Confirm the amended Terms of Reference and delegated arrangements for running that consultation

Both recommendations were carried by 17 votes to 6 (or 7) with 6 (or 5) abstentions, depending on the motion.

Supporters: "Residents must have a voice before the borough is abolished"

Cllr John Beckett (RA Auriol), who proposed the motion, framed the issue as a democratic response to the looming abolition of the borough council under Surrey's move to two unitary authorities. He warned of a 75% reduction in elected representation once Epsom and Ewell's 35 borough councillors and 5 county councillors are replaced with just 10 unitary councillors.

Beckett said: *"These changes are about the centralisation of power and money all at the expense of local democracy."* He added that the first consultation—352 responses, with 67% supporting further investigation—was *"the second highest response to a borough-wide consultation outside the Local Plan"*.

He argued that parish-style councils could preserve local identity and provide continuity: *"For our residents... this gives our residents a choice, and it gives our residents a voice."*

Cllr Hannah Dalton told councillors that other areas undergoing unitary transitions, including Northamptonshire, Wiltshire and Somerset, saw unparished areas *"left behind"*. She said that if Epsom and Ewell did not act now, it risked becoming *"the only unparished area in East Surrey"*.

She added: *"Tonight we are only asking you to support further consultation... with a precept that has no transfer of assets, whatever our colleagues are saying."*

Cllr Neil Dallen (RA Town) said the proposal was modest: *"We go out to the residents and we ask them... whether they want us to continue."*

Cllr Rachel King (RA Town) emphasised that the public had only given feedback on principles so far: *"We now need to give them a proper opportunity to respond to a fleshed out proposal... We owe it to our residents to give them a voice."*

Opponents: "A flawed consultation, a financial burden, and a political stitch-up"

Opposition councillors delivered some of the sharpest criticism heard in the chamber for years.

Claims of a flawed consultation

Cllr Julian Freeman (Lib Dem College) said the consultation process was *"flawed"* because respondents were forced to select an option rather than reject the idea outright. He argued: *"This is the wrong issue at the wrong time... The only reason this is being raised now is to create a role for the people in this room."*

Cllr Rob Geleit (Labour Court), speaking also on behalf of absent **Cllr Kate Chinn**, said the proposals lacked community backing: *"A flawed and skewed consultation, a lack of engagement... giving no mandate... and poor financial analysis."* He added: *"I see no point in removing a layer of democracy only to add it back again on a lesser level."*

Cllr Alison Kelly (Lib Dem Stamford) said residents were mostly concerned about planning, but that the parish proposals did not address this: *"Most people... give the issue of allotments very little thought. We are showing a cost of a parish council around £45 for an allotment you don't need in a flat."* She noted that only around 230 respondents had expressed a desire for a parish council.

Financial warnings: 98.7% admin, 1.3% allotments

Cllr James Lawrence (Lib Dem College) highlighted the ratio in the report: approximately £1.5m in administrative overheads versus £20,000 for allotment running costs. *"You will be telling [residents] you're creating a parish council that is just for allotments... the allotments cost is 1.3% of the tax you're going to charge."* He added that consultation documents risked misleading residents by listing admin and allotments side-by-side *"as if they were roughly equal"*.

"An uncapped tax burden on struggling households"

Cllr Alex Coley warned that the real precept could be much higher—up to £180 for Band D properties—if the community

councils later took on community buildings with significant maintenance liabilities such as Bourne Hall: *“It would be disingenuous to go to residents with £40-something pounds when it could be £180... We should not seek a view from residents with a lower figure and then quadruple it.”* He said many residents were *“struggling financially”* and called the proposals *“an astonishing waste of time, energy and money.”*

Cllr Bernie Muir (Conservative Horton) urged councillors to wait until the new unitary structure and Surrey’s pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) bedded in: *“I think this is a premature discussion... we should see how the unitaries and NACs pan out and then move forward if we need to.”*

Cllr Chris Ames (Labour Court) was highly critical of the RA leadership: *“This wasn’t a review. This was one option chosen by the Residents’ Association to meet its own purposes... It’s all about providing a jumping-off point for the clique that runs this council.”*

Admin cost vs allotment cost: the core numerical controversy

Using the figures in the Report to Council:

- Admin and support costs for new community councils: approx. £1.5 million
- Cost of allotment management: approx. £20,000

That means roughly:

- 98.7% of the expenditure is administration
- 1.3% is allotment provision

This ratio became a central argument for opponents, particularly **Cllr Lawrence**, who said allotments would be a *“rounding error”* in the parish budget.

Supporters responded that these were not final budgets, merely illustrative maxima, and that Phase 2 consultation would use the *true* starting point—around £43-£46 Band D—with no asset transfers.

Conclusion

The council has opted to continue exploring parish councils despite sharp divisions. The second public consultation will now seek residents’ views on more detailed proposals before a final decision in March 2026—months before the borough is abolished and replaced by the new East Surrey unitary authority.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Neighbour Area Committees in Surrey

18 December 2025



UNITARY COUNCIL
Will replace Surrey County Council and borough and district councils from 2027

NEIGHBOURHOOD AREA COMMITTEE
Pilot NACs established in East Elmbridge, Dorking & the Villages, North Tandridge, and Farnham
An advisory partnership; not a statutory body; no independent budget

- County councillors
- District/borough councillors
- Other public services
- Community groups
- Residents

PARISH COUNCIL
Proposed separately in Epsom and Ewell
A formal local council, elected body; raises funds through a precept

As Surrey prepares for major local government reorganisation, the County Council has been trialling a new model of community involvement known as Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs). These committees, currently operating in four pilot areas, are designed to give residents and partners a stronger voice in shaping local priorities without creating new councils or adding an extra layer of taxation. With Epsom and Ewell facing the abolition of its borough council in 2027 and debating whether two parish councils should be established, attention is turning to whether NACs offer an alternative blueprint for local influence in the new unitary era.

The first three pilot NACs were launched in summer 2025 in East Elmbridge, Dorking and the Villages, and North Tandridge. A fourth area, Farnham, joined the initiative in September. These areas were selected to test the model across different geographies and community types, including both parished and unparished areas. Epsom and Ewell is not currently included in the pilot scheme, but the County Council has indicated that NACs could eventually be rolled out county-wide if the pilots prove successful.

Unlike parish or town councils, NACs are not statutory bodies. They do not have legal powers, budgets or the ability to raise a precept through council tax. Surrey County Council describes them as advisory partnerships that bring together elected representatives, public services, voluntary and community organisations and local residents to identify shared priorities and shape decision-making at a neighbourhood level. Typical membership includes county councillors, district or borough councillors (where applicable), representatives from health, police, education and the voluntary sector, alongside community groups and residents. Subject specialists from County Hall provide officer support.

The aim is to encourage more collaborative working between public services and communities, promote preventative approaches, and ensure that future unitary authorities have access to local intelligence when planning services. NACs sit outside the formal structures of governance and do not replace any existing body. Where parish councils exist, they may participate in a NAC, but the NAC itself has no authority over them.

NAC boundaries are formed using existing county electoral divisions as building blocks, refined to ensure the populations are of manageable size, roughly around 50,000 residents. The pilots are running until the end of 2025, after which Surrey County Council will assess their effectiveness and consider whether to expand them across the county. The evaluation will look at levels of participation, the quality of partnership working, community impact and how well NACs might support the new East and West Surrey unitary councils from 2027.

The emergence of NACs adds an additional dimension to the ongoing debate within Epsom and Ewell about whether to create parish councils. Parish councils are formal, elected bodies with defined legal powers and the ability to raise funds through a precept. NACs, by contrast, are informal community partnerships with no statutory authority. Supporters of the parish council model argue that a legally constituted local body is necessary to preserve democratic representation once the borough disappears. Others believe NACs might offer a lighter-touch mechanism to maintain local influence without recreating a second tier of government or introducing new local taxes.

Whether NACs become a central feature of local engagement under East Surrey Council will depend on the outcome of the pilot phase and the design decisions made by the incoming Shadow Authority after May 2026. For now, Surrey's NAC pilots provide an insight into one possible direction for neighbourhood-level involvement in the years after reorganisation.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Surrey author's unexpected journey to global football goodwill

18 December 2025



If you had asked Surrey-based accidental author Stephen Johnson twenty years ago whether he would one day write a ten-book children's series, sponsor a grassroots football kit in East London, and end up backing a trophy for "the worst team in the world" in Micronesia, he says he would have laughed. Yet life, he reflects, has a habit of surprising you.

Johnson, who has lived in the Epsom & Ewell area for many years, says the whole adventure began almost by accident, from the writing to the football involvement. His children's picture-book series *Berry Town* did not begin with a long-held dream but with a workplace bet. "I'd been telling a colleague that anyone can achieve anything with enough persistence," he recalls. "He challenged me to write a book. I told him books take years, so he said, 'Fine, write a children's book.' Challenge accepted."

The idea took shape around characters inspired by fruit. Years earlier, Johnson had pitched a fruit-based TV concept that was dismissed on the grounds that "kids aren't interested in fruit", but the idea stuck with him. When the challenge arrived, he created the Berry Town community, beginning with Mrs Straw, a character he describes as having "very Hyacinth Bucket vibes". Illustrator David Leonard joined after Johnson scoured the internet for artists willing to take on the unusual brief with a modest budget. "David just got it," he says. "My sketches needed rescuing, and his flat, colourful artwork brought the whole world alive."

There were some early hiccups, including a character name that had to be changed after a reviewer pointed out an unfortunate slang meaning. "That one needed fixing straight away," Johnson admits. "You never forget moments like that."

Before *Berry Town* ever reached Micronesia, it first made its mark in East London. In 2009, Johnson sponsored a full kit for Senrab FC, a grassroots club renowned for producing future Premier League players. The shirts featured bespoke artwork of two *Berry Town* characters, the Boysen Twins. "I was doing well at the time and wanted to give back," he says. "Helping kids felt right." Many of the young players still remember "the Berry Town kit", and several were given copies of the books — one child telling him it was the first book they had ever owned. "If you can support kids in football and in reading, you do it," Johnson says.

But the most surprising chapter unfolded 7,000 miles away in Pohnpei, Micronesia. Johnson came across an article about two British men, Paul Watson and Matt Conrad, who travelled there to coach what was widely considered the worst football team in the world. "I loved their ambition," he says. "I contacted them and asked if I could help."

He ended up sponsoring the Berry Town Cup — awarded to the runners-up of the Pohnpei Premier League. The main trophy had already been sponsored, so he took the next one available. Only later did he realise the league was often improvised, with teams struggling to assemble due to travel costs. "But none of that mattered. I just wanted to help," he says. He also sent copies of the books to local schools, where they became unexpected resources for children learning English.

More than a decade later, Johnson rediscovered the original artwork, drafts, and even the formal sponsorship certificate tucked away on an old computer. "It was labelled 'Old Projects, Berry Town'," he says. "I opened it all up and smiled. I'd forgotten how much heart went into it." Sharing the story with his football-mad 13-year-old son brought new joy. "He loved it," Johnson says. "He started researching Pohnpei, asking questions. It became this lovely bonding moment."

Although Johnson believes *Berry Town* "has had its time", he is considering releasing the books digitally, probably for free. "Why not let the world enjoy them?" he says.

What began as a playful dare became a decade-spanning adventure involving creativity, kindness, international football, and a legacy that travelled far further than its author could ever have imagined.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Photo: International FC, being awarded the Berry-Town.com Pohnpei Premier League Runners-Up Cup

“Us and Them” visualises connections with former Epsom patients

18 December 2025



A ground-breaking heritage project exploring the lives of disabled people detained in Surrey’s former mental hospitals is turning fresh attention on Horton Cemetery in Epsom – the burial ground of some 9,000 men, women and children whose resting place remains locked, overgrown and inaccessible under the control of a property speculator who has neglected the site since the 1980s.

Freewheelers Theatre and Media, a creative company of disabled artists based in Leatherhead, is leading *Us and Them*, a National Lottery Heritage Fund-supported initiative using original medical portrait photographs and case records from Surrey’s long-closed asylums. Working with photographer Emma Brown, community history group On the Record and researchers at King’s College London, they are uncovering the stories of patients whose voices were seldom heard in their lifetimes. The project includes new wet-collodion portraits of Freewheelers members made using the same Victorian techniques once used in institutions such as The Manor Hospital and West Park. These contemporary portraits will be shown alongside the originals in a touring exhibition, with the first major display due to take place at The Horton, Epsom, in 2026.

For Epsom, the work resonates particularly with Horton Cemetery – the former burial ground for patients from the Epsom Cluster hospitals, including The Manor, Horton, Long Grove, West Park and St Ebba’s. Despite its national historic significance as the largest asylum cemetery in the UK, the cemetery has been left to decay for decades and remains closed to relatives, historians and the wider community. The Friends of Horton Cemetery continue to campaign for its return to public or charitable ownership so that the site can be restored, documented and respected as the resting place it once was.

The Freewheelers project highlights the human stories behind those buried there. One participant, Alice Scott, chose to pair herself with Rose Harris, a woman confined to The Manor Hospital in 1910 and buried in a pauper plot at Horton Cemetery in 1917. Another member, Pete Messer, recreated the photograph of workhouse survivor Frederick Tarrant, who spent 15 years in various institutions, part of the same system that funnelled thousands of patients to unmarked graves in Epsom.

Historians involved in *Us and Them* emphasise how the original photographs were created without consent for purposes of classification and diagnosis, often contributing to stigma. Today, the Freewheelers portraits aim to prompt public reflection on how disability is perceived and represented, and how society remembers – or forgets – those who lived and died within institutional care. The project’s December creative sessions coincide with a Christie’s auction of similar historical images, underlining renewed public interest in the stories of institutionalised people.

The Friends of Horton Cemetery say the renewed national attention generated by projects like *Us and Them* strengthens the argument that the burial ground must be brought back into community hands. Volunteers have long argued that the cemetery is a unique and irreplaceable heritage site, containing the life histories of people from across Britain and the world, many of whom have living descendants still searching for answers.

Recent BBC reporting has highlighted the scale of the neglect, the site’s condition and the growing calls for public ownership. For many families, the cemetery is the last physical link to relatives whose lives were shaped by the former Epsom institutions. Campaigners say that without intervention, the stories now being rediscovered risk remaining disconnected from the very place where so many of those patients were laid to rest.

More information about the Friends’ campaign and the history of the site and some 500 personal stories of the patients buried in the Epsom Hospital Cluster cemetery in Hook Road/Horton Lane, Epsom can be found at www.hortoncemetery.org

Sam Jones – Reporter



See BBC coverage here:

Disability group recreates Victorian hospital images

'Grandad is one of 9,000 buried in derelict site'

Call for public ownership of asylum cemetery

Related reports in Epsom and Ewell Times:

Portraits of pauper patients in Epsom's Horton Cemetery, inspires artist

Petition to reclaim Horton Cemetery from property speculator

Local community gathered at Horton Cemetery

Another Horton Cemetery Life Story

Image: Background Horton Cemetery: *photographed on 28 February 1971 by L R James. Epsom & Ewell Local & Family History Centre.* Foreground: Courtesy Friends of Horton Cemetery

MP warns as 3,600 Epsom homes face fuel poverty

18 December 2025



More than 3,600 households in Epsom and Ewell are estimated to be living in fuel poverty this winter, according to new figures that have reignited debate over the Government's decision to scale back national home-insulation funding.

The estimates come in the same week the Chancellor announced cuts to the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme, a long-running programme that funds energy-saving improvements such as insulation in low-income households. Government data indicates ECO has delivered 1,866 installations locally, helping families reduce heat loss from older homes that are often poorly insulated. Local MP Helen Maguire said withdrawing support now would leave "thousands of families in draughty homes and facing high bills" at a time when many residents already feel financially stretched.

Fuel poverty is measured by comparing a home's required energy costs with household income. National charities warn the UK remains one of the worst-insulated housing stocks in Western Europe, meaning households are more vulnerable to spikes in market energy prices. Despite a fall in wholesale gas costs over the past year, Ofgem confirmed that bills remain significantly above pre-crisis levels, and several support schemes introduced during the 2022-23 energy shock are winding down.

Analysts at the Resolution Foundation have noted that around half of the temporary support announced in the Budget is due to expire within three years. Separate modelling by climate think-tank E3G suggests reducing the scope of ECO could prevent up to a million homes nationwide from receiving insulation improvements over the next four years and may lead to job losses in the retrofit and construction sector.

The Government has argued that its energy efficiency targets remain in place and that the Budget decisions reflect wider fiscal pressures. Ministers say additional measures to stabilise wholesale prices and support low-income households will continue. But campaigners and industry groups have expressed concern that cutting insulation programmes risks higher long-term costs for both consumers and the state, as poorly insulated homes require more energy to heat.

Helen Maguire said residents are already reporting that "they feel poorer by the day" and called on ministers to back a more ambitious national upgrade scheme. The Liberal Democrats are advocating an emergency programme offering free insulation and heat pumps for people on low incomes, alongside removing the Renewables Obligation levy from electricity bills. The party claims that breaking the link between gas and electricity prices and scaling up home retrofit work could halve household energy bills by 2035.

As temperatures fall, local authorities, charities and advice services expect increased demand from households struggling to balance heating costs with other essential spending. Nationally, fuel poverty campaigners continue to urge the Government to treat insulation as an infrastructure priority, warning that winter pressures will persist until the UK's older housing stock is modernised at scale.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Young Surrey volunteers help shape new neuroinclusive travel app

18 December 2025



Young people in Surrey have helped test a new travel-planning app designed to make public transport less stressful for neurodivergent passengers. Members of ATLAS, Surrey Youth Voice's participation group for young people with additional needs and disabilities, spent three days trialling *Aubin*, a free app that takes a different approach to journey planning.

Unlike standard apps that prioritise the quickest route, *Aubin* focuses on reducing anxiety and supporting users who may find travel overwhelming. The app allows travellers to tailor their journey according to personal needs, rather than simply finding the fastest option. ATLAS members used it to plan and carry out trips across North, East and West Surrey, assessing how effectively it helped with independence and confidence.

Aubin functions as both a route planner and a "travel companion". Alongside directions, it offers practical tools to support users in moments of uncertainty. These include grounding exercises to help regulate emotions during difficult points in a journey; a type-to-speech feature for anyone who may struggle to speak when stressed; and an editable Autism Card that allows travellers to explain needs quickly and discreetly to staff or fellow passengers. Users can also set preferences that shape the route suggested, such as avoiding busy interchanges or long waits.

ATLAS has long advocated for more accessible, neuroinclusive transport options, arguing that navigating public transport is essential for young people to reach education, work and social opportunities. Members described the trial as a chance to influence a product that could help reduce isolation and build independence for others with similar needs.

At the end of the pilot, ATLAS met with *Aubin*'s co-founder and product manager, Corinna Smiles, to give detailed feedback. Suggestions included adding journey-sharing options so a trusted contact can follow someone's progress, communication prompts for stressful situations, and a checklist to help users prepare before leaving home. *Aubin* welcomed the recommendations and said they would incorporate them into future updates.

Ms Smiles said the pilot was a valuable example of user-led design and thanked the group for helping shape the app. ATLAS members have since given *Aubin* their "seal of approval", encouraging other neurodivergent young people to try it.

ATLAS member Emily said taking part "felt empowering" and that knowing the group's input would help autistic travellers made the experience worthwhile: "I feel honoured to have been part of shaping this app, which I'm sure will give many people the tools to travel with confidence."

Councillor Helyn Clack, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said the collaboration showed the importance of designing tools with "the voices of the community they serve", and that the app has real potential to improve accessibility.

Aubin is free to download from app stores.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Image - Surrey County Council news

Here's some Spring cheer as Winter approaches Epsom and Ewell

18 December 2025



Nonsuch Park has been awarded two top honours at the 2025 South & South East in Bloom Awards, taking **Gold** for both *Heritage Park of the Year* and *Large Conservation Area*. The Gold Award is the scheme's highest accolade, reserved for entries judged to have achieved exceptional standards across all assessment categories.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council said the result reflects a sustained programme of heritage restoration and environmental management, including the refurbishment of garden features such as the greenhouse, continued care of its champion trees, and conservation work across the wider landscape. Judges described Nonsuch Park as "an exceptional example of conservation in action", commending its carefully managed habitats, historic setting and community engagement projects.

Councillor **Anthony Froud** (RA Stoneleigh), Chairman of the Nonsuch Park Joint Management Committee, said: "This is an incredible achievement and a reflection of the dedication of our volunteers and staff. Local volunteers, the Nonsuch Voles, and the Council's Countryside, Property and Estates, and Operational teams work year-round to protect and enhance this unique heritage landscape for the benefit of wildlife, visitors and future generations. These Gold Awards celebrate their hard work and the deep pride our community takes in Nonsuch Park."

Governance of Nonsuch Park

Unlike most parks in the borough, Nonsuch Park is not managed solely by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council. It is overseen by the Nonsuch Park Joint Management Committee (JMC), a long-standing partnership between Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and the London Borough of Sutton. The arrangement dates back to the 1930s, when the two authorities jointly acquired the estate to prevent the land from being sold for development.

Under the current structure, the JMC is responsible for strategic decisions concerning the park's maintenance, heritage assets, conservation plans and public access. Day-to-day operations are delivered by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council on behalf of the partnership, with Sutton contributing towards the running costs through an annual financial agreement. Representatives from both councils sit on the committee, ensuring shared oversight of policy, budget and long-term planning.

The Joint Management Committee model is one of the reasons Nonsuch Park has been able to maintain its character and heritage significance. It enables coordinated management across borough boundaries while preserving the historic landscape as a single entity. Local volunteer groups, notably the Nonsuch Voles, play an important supporting role, undertaking conservation tasks, habitat improvement, garden restoration and public engagement throughout the year.

With thousands of visitors each week, Nonsuch Park remains one of the region's most valued open spaces. This year's double Gold Award adds to its growing list of recognitions and underlines its importance as both a heritage landscape and a biodiversity-rich green space for the wider community.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey University balloon study of solar flares informs current air safety concerns

18 December 2025



New balloon-mounted radiation probes developed by the Surrey Space Centre at the University of Surrey have captured their first readings of a major solar storm, confirming that levels of cosmic radiation at typical cruising altitude briefly surged to their highest point in almost two decades. The findings come as aviation authorities worldwide are responding to unrelated but highly publicised technical concerns affecting a small number of long-haul aircraft, prompting the UK Transport Secretary to offer public reassurance.

The powerful X5-class solar flare recorded on 11 November 2025 triggered a rare Ground Level Enhancement (GLE), in which solar energetic particles penetrated unusually deep into the atmosphere. Within an hour, the UK Met Office and the Dutch meteorological agency KNMI launched rapid-response weather balloons equipped with Surrey's newly developed sensors, sending them through commercial-aircraft altitudes and far higher.

Early analysis shows that radiation at 40,000 feet briefly reached almost ten times normal background levels. Scientists stress that the spike posed no immediate health risk to passengers or crew, but they note the potential for temporary pressure on aircraft electronics. Surrey researchers estimate that during the storm's peak, "single-event upsets" — tiny, unpredictable bit-flips in onboard computer memory caused by energetic particles — may have reached around 60 errors per hour per gigabyte.

Clive Dyer of the Surrey Space Centre said the November surge was the strongest event of its kind since December 2006, with new UK neutron monitors at Guildford, Lerwick and Camborne helping to map the storm's radiation footprint across global airspace. Researchers emphasise that while far larger historical events are known — including the record 1956 radiation storm and the ancient "Miyake Events" revealed through tree rings — such extremes have never struck during the modern aviation era.

The renewed scientific focus on space weather arrives during a period of public sensitivity around flight safety. In recent days, several international carriers have reported technical issues affecting specific aircraft types, prompting precautionary inspections and, in some jurisdictions, temporary operational restrictions. Although no link has been made between these aircraft issues and solar activity, the incidents have heightened passenger concern.

Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander, responding to the situation, said: "I am aware of the technical issue impacting certain aircraft and concerns over how this will affect passengers and flights this evening. Passengers who are due to fly this weekend should check with their carriers for the latest information. The good news is it seems the impact on UK airlines seems limited with a smaller number of aircraft requiring more complex software and hardware changes. I would really like to thank the experts, staff and airlines who are working at pace to address this and reassure passengers that work is ongoing. It is heartening this issue has been identified and will be addressed so swiftly, demonstrating the high aviation safety standards globally."

The Surrey sensors, engineered to withstand near-vacuum conditions and temperatures down to -70°C , stream real-time radiation data up to 100,000 feet. Their results will be used to refine models at the Met Office Space Weather Operations Centre, improving forecasting for sectors reliant on high-altitude electronics, including aviation.

Keith Ryden, Director of Surrey Space Centre, said the 11 November flare provided the team's first opportunity to use the rapid-launch sensors in a live event, producing a "3D picture" of radiation patterns across UK airspace. Met Office Space Weather Manager Krista Hammond added that this is the first time radiation has been measured across such a broad range of altitudes during a solar storm, describing the new data as "a big leap forward" for forecasting capability.

Further launches are planned from Met Office sites in Lerwick and Camborne, and from KNMI in the Netherlands, as the current solar cycle moves into a more active phase. Aviation regulators say the Surrey results will help inform future operational guidance during solar storms, while the Transport Secretary emphasised that UK passenger safety remains "of the highest priority".

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey consults on next year's budget

18 December 2025



Surrey County Council has opened a public consultation on its draft budget for 2026/27, asking residents across the county to comment on proposals ahead of final decisions next year. Each year the council sets out how it will fund essential local services including adult social care, children’s services, special educational needs provision, highways, libraries, public health programmes, fire and rescue, and environmental maintenance. The authority says the coming year presents one of its most difficult financial challenges for over a decade due to the government’s Fair Funding Review, which will reduce Surrey’s central government grant and increase reliance on council tax and other locally-raised income. At present, the council reports a provisional £21.3 million funding gap for 2026/27.

The Fair Funding Review is a long-anticipated national reform intended to change how Whitehall allocates money to local authorities. Early modelling indicates that areas with strong tax bases such as Surrey will see reduced relative need-based funding, while more deprived areas gain. Surrey has already seen its core government grant fall dramatically over the past decade. According to publicly available Local Government Finance Settlement figures, Surrey’s Revenue Support Grant dropped from over £130 million in 2010 to effectively £0 in recent years, leaving the council heavily dependent on council tax, which already accounts for around 74% of its income. Rising inflation, growth in demand for adult social care and special educational needs services, and ongoing cost pressures linked to contract inflation and staffing shortages have compounded these challenges.

Councillor Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said Surrey was “facing one of the most challenging financial periods in its history”. He added that the government’s new funding approach “has a direct impact on the services we provide”, stressing that protecting the most critical functions remains the priority, including support for vulnerable adults, children, and families and the infrastructure that keeps the county moving. He noted that this is the final budget to be set before Surrey’s existing county structure is dissolved and replaced with two new unitary authorities, East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council, from April 2027 following the government’s recent decision on local government reorganisation.

Surrey County Council has pointed to its past record of setting balanced budgets in contrast to several authorities nationally that have issued Section 114 “bankruptcy” notices in recent years, including Northamptonshire, Croydon, Slough, Woking and Birmingham. However, the council’s financial resilience has been tested. The county faces one of the largest high-needs deficits for special educational needs in the South East.

Councillor David Lewis, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, said that reduced government support combined with rising costs means the authority must “plan even more carefully to ensure support reaches those who need it most”. Adult social care, children’s services, and SEND support together account for close to two-thirds of the council’s entire net budget. He acknowledged that residents also value “visible services” such as road maintenance, libraries, and community spaces, emphasising the importance of public feedback in prioritising investment.

The draft budget consultation will shape the final budget papers to be published in January 2026 and submitted to Full Council in February. Residents can view the proposals online and submit comments until 11.59pm on Sunday 4 January 2026.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Image: Surrey Budget graphic from Surrey County Council Youtube video

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