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26th November 2026

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Surrey tech pioneers get £25k boost in start-up drive

2 April 2026



Surrey's emerging tech entrepreneurs have been given a significant boost after more than 30 early-stage innovators completed the first cohort of a new county-wide startup programme.

Surrey Venture Studios (SVS), a business growth initiative backed by the University of Surrey and partners, has supported participants through workshops, mentoring and pitching opportunities aimed at turning early ideas into viable technology businesses. The programme offers selected founders £25,000 in funding alongside six months of expert support to help launch and scale their ventures.

First cohort builds momentum

Organisers say the inaugural cohort brought together a diverse range of innovators working across multiple sectors, all benefiting from access to experienced mentors and investors. Participants attended intensive workshops designed to refine ideas and prepare them for pitching to expert panels.

Ody Bassioukas, manager of Surrey Venture Studios, said the programme had already demonstrated how quickly ideas could develop with the right support: "It's been incredibly energising to see just how much progress can happen in a matter of days… ideas gaining clarity, confidence building, and new pathways starting to take shape."

Among those taking part was Elizabeth Baldwin, founder of Puzzle Proof, a digital system aimed at supporting survivors of domestic abuse. She said the programme had helped validate her idea and encouraged her to take it forward.

Industry figures have also backed the initiative. Iain Jamieson, chairman of the S100 Angel Investment Club, described the programme as "exactly the kind of support that is needed" to help new entrepreneurs succeed.

Applications open for next round

Following the success of the first cohort, applications are now open for a second intake, with a deadline of 8 May and workshops scheduled for June.

The programme is open to people living, working or studying in Surrey and includes an initial two-day workshop and pitching process, with successful applicants progressing to the funded accelerator stage.

Caroline Fleming, director of the Surrey Innovation District ecosystem at the University of Surrey, encouraged prospective applicants to come forward: "This is your opportunity to realise your tech entrepreneur ambition, supported by our world-class innovation ecosystem."

Addressing a gap in startup support

Surrey Venture Studios has been developed in collaboration with Royal Holloway and the University for the Creative Arts, alongside Surrey County Council, to address what organisers describe as a longstanding gap in support for very early-stage innovators.

By combining funding, mentoring and structured development, the programme aims to help bridge the gap between concept and commercial readiness for new technology businesses.

A webinar for prospective applicants is scheduled for 21 April, offering further information on how the scheme works and how to apply.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Climate emergency comes to Epsom

2 April 2026



A community screening of a national climate film is set to take place in Epsom next month, bringing together residents, councillors and community groups to explore what the climate and nature crisis means locally.

The event, hosted by St Martin’s Church and Sustainable Epsom and Ewell, will feature *The People’s Emergency Briefing*, a 45-minute film based on a high-level national briefing delivered in Westminster last year.

Organisers say the screening forms part of a UK-wide programme designed to make complex information about climate and environmental risks more accessible at a local level, with community discussions encouraged after each showing.

Local screening details

The Epsom event will take place on Saturday 11 April at St Martin’s Church, Church Street, starting at 3pm (doors open 2.30pm). Entry is free, although attendees are asked to register in advance so organisers can plan capacity.

Invitations have been extended to local councillors, community leaders and Epsom and Ewell’s MP, alongside residents interested in environmental issues.

From Westminster briefing to community film

The film is based on a landmark briefing held in November 2025 at Westminster Central Hall, attended by more than 1,200 MPs, peers and leaders from across business, culture, faith and media.

Experts at the event examined the implications of climate and nature breakdown across areas such as food security, health, infrastructure and the economy, alongside practical evidence on how risks might be reduced.

That material has now been adapted into a public-facing film, launching nationally in April 2026, with screenings planned in venues ranging from churches and village halls to libraries and schools.

A “civic event” as well as a film

Organisers emphasise that the screenings are intended not just as film showings but as civic events, encouraging discussion about local impacts and responses.

Each event is expected to include a facilitated discussion, allowing residents to reflect on how national risks relate to their

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own communities.

The wider programme has backing from organisations including WWF, the National Trust, CPRE and the Royal Meteorological Society, with hundreds of screenings anticipated across the country.

Broadcaster Chris Packham, who opened the original Westminster briefing, said: “I’d encourage people everywhere to attend a screening… It creates exactly the kind of honest local conversation we now urgently need.”

Local focus

For Epsom and Ewell, the event offers a chance to connect global environmental challenges with local concerns, from green space and biodiversity to resilience and community preparedness.

Organisers say they hope the screening will help spark informed, constructive discussion about how the borough can respond to the issues raised.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Event Listing Details Here

£200 sports bursary launched for Epsom & Ewell teenagers

2 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has launched a new bursary scheme aimed at helping young people overcome financial barriers to taking part in sport.

The “Access to Activity” bursary offers up to £200 to help cover the cost of sports club memberships, subscriptions and match fees for 12–15-year-olds living in the borough. It is open to families where children receive free school meals, or where parents or guardians receive Universal Credit, as well as those with care experience.

Applications will open on Monday 30 March 2026 and run until 31 December 2026, or until the available funding has been allocated.

The council says the scheme forms part of its Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which aims to increase physical activity and reduce health inequalities locally. A range of local sports clubs are expected to take part, with more invited to join throughout the year.

Councillor Clive Woodbridge, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, said: “We know that for many families, the cost of taking part in sport can be a real obstacle. By helping to ease financial pressures, the Access to Activity bursary can help ensure 12–15-year-olds can take part in a sport they enjoy, feel included and thrive.”

He added that the scheme builds on the council’s earlier “Young Legends” programme, extending support to older children while continuing efforts to boost confidence, skills and social connections through sport.

How the scheme works

Eligible applicants must first arrange a taster session with a participating sports club. If they wish to continue, they then complete a council application form, after which the council will confirm next steps.

The grant is a one-off payment, with priority given to residents who have not received similar council funding for physical activity in the past five years. Successful applicants will then enrol directly with their chosen club.

The council notes that awards are discretionary, with no right of appeal for unsuccessful applications, and may be closed early if demand exceeds available funding.

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Local sports clubs and community organisations are also encouraged to signpost eligible families to the scheme as part of a wider effort to increase participation in sport among young people in Epsom & Ewell.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Image: Lake Point Orthodontics CC licence

Carers “left with nowhere to turn” after Surrey cuts support services?

2 April 2026



Charity warns of risks to 1,500 carers as safety net withdrawn

A Surrey charity has warned that unpaid carers across the county are being pushed “beyond breaking point” following the withdrawal of key support services by Surrey County Council (SCC), a move it says could leave vulnerable residents at risk and increase pressure on hospitals and emergency care.

Crossroads Care Surrey says two critical services — Emergency Care Provision and End of Life support — are being removed, alongside the ending of the Carer Emergency Planning service at the end of March, affecting around 1,500 carers who rely on it as a safety net in times of crisis.

The charity says the decision was made with little notice and without consultation, leaving carers uncertain about what will happen if they are suddenly unable to provide care.

Under the existing system, carers can create emergency plans with named contacts and a guaranteed back-up response if those contacts are unavailable. Crossroads says it is this final layer — the guaranteed emergency response — that is now being removed.

Terry Hawkins, CEO of Crossroads Care Surrey, said: “In an emergency, carers don’t need signposting, they need someone to step in.”

“A false economy” and fears of increased hospital admissions

The charity argues the cuts risk shifting pressure onto already overstretched NHS and social care services, warning that without preventative support, more vulnerable people could end up in hospital or crisis care situations.

It says the current emergency planning service costs around £200 per carer per year, compared with more than £1,200 for a single day in a hospital bed, describing the move as a “false economy”.

Concerns have also been raised about the reliability of alternative arrangements. Crossroads says that in some cases the council’s Emergency Duty Care Team has failed to respond to emergency requests, even with advance notice, citing lack of available resources.

The charity is now launching its own paid-for emergency support scheme, but warns this risks creating a two-tier system where only those who can afford to pay will have access to reliable back-up care.

Human impact: “Without support, families reach breaking point”

The potential consequences are illustrated by the case of Eleanor, 53, who cares for her 13-year-old son Tom, who has severe autism and OCD.

Under intense pressure, Eleanor attempted suicide, triggering an emergency response from Crossroads Care Surrey, which stepped in within hours to care for Tom for over two weeks while she recovered. Without that intervention, Tom would likely have entered emergency social care.

The charity says this is not an isolated case but an example of how quickly carers can reach crisis point without adequate

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support.

Council response: “Services did not achieve expected impact”

Surrey County Council has defended its decision, saying the contracts with Crossroads Care Surrey are not being renewed because they “failed to achieve the impact we expected” and had lower-than-anticipated take-up.

Sinead Mooney, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, said: “After careful review, we’ve decided to end – or not renew – contracts with Crossroads Care Surrey for carer support services because the contracts have failed to achieve the impact we expected. Take-up has been lower than we intended and we can’t justify continuing to fund the arrangements.”

She added: “We’re absolutely committed to making sure that the transition from these contracts for carers is smooth, responsive and supportive, and we encourage any carer with questions to contact the council directly. In Surrey we go above and beyond our statutory duty to support carers and are committed to using our resources as effectively as we can.”

The council says it will introduce a revised approach, including a one-off £300 wellbeing payment for carers and closer working with NHS partners, and maintains that emergency support will continue through existing social care processes.

Questions over consultation and transparency

Crossroads Care Surrey has questioned how decisions affecting thousands of carers could be made without public consultation or Cabinet scrutiny, and is calling on the council to explain how the changes align with its duties under the Care Act.

The charity warns that unpaid carers — who collectively provide care valued at an estimated £162 billion annually across the UK — are an essential but often overlooked part of the health and care system, and that reducing support risks undermining that foundation.

With the changes due to take effect imminently, carers across Surrey now face uncertainty over what support will be available when they need it most.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports:

Some Surrey care services at a crossroads?

Some Surrey care services at a crossroads?

Energy debt fears rise as Epsom’s Good Company’s support steps up

2 April 2026



Rising energy costs could push more households into debt this year, with local support services warning of growing pressure on low-income families.

Good Company (Surrey), which runs the Epsom & Ewell Foodbank, says many of the people it supports are already struggling to keep up with bills. With further increases in gas and electricity prices expected when the energy price cap is reviewed in July, concerns are mounting about the impact on vulnerable households.

Energy debt among clients is already significant, averaging around £900 per household. The charity says this is placing “enormous pressure” on families trying to manage day-to-day living costs.

To help address the issue, Good Company has expanded its programme of energy support workshops. These sessions offer

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practical advice on reducing energy use and costs, alongside providing items such as energy-efficient appliances and heated blankets to help people stay warm at home.

One participant described the sessions as eye-opening, saying: “So many things! Learning about radiator reflectors, energy surveys, how much a shower costs per hour. Being provided with further info to go away and look into. The £50 voucher and the appliance were a fabulous surprise. Thank you!”

For households already in arrears, the organisation is also offering access to an intensive debt relief programme, working with specialist energy advisers to help people find a sustainable path out of debt. Tom, Participation and Prevention Director at Good Company, said: “At Good Company, we can’t control global events — but we can help local families reduce their energy use, ease the burden of debt, and feel more secure at home.”

Employment support under review

Alongside energy concerns, the charity has been reviewing how well employment and skills support is working locally.

A recent event brought together advisers and senior leaders from local services to discuss findings from research into clients’ experiences. The study found that access to good quality work can make a major difference to financial resilience and wellbeing, but that support is not always reaching those who need it most.

While some people reported positive experiences and success in finding new roles, others highlighted gaps in awareness of available services. There were also concerns about continuity, with some clients losing support when advisers move on, and difficulties accessing training in specific sectors. Some felt held back by a lack of qualifications.

The findings have prompted discussions about improving promotion of employment support through community touchpoints such as GP surgeries, strengthening adviser handovers, and increasing awareness of local training opportunities. Ellie, Community Researcher, said: “This has been a great exercise for us, inspiring us to think about where we can improve our service and maybe even add in some new initiatives.”

New platform aims to join up services

In a further step to improve support, Good Company has launched ReferSurrey, a secure referral platform designed to connect people with a wider network of local services.

The system links users to advice, health and community organisations, with the aim of addressing the underlying causes of financial hardship through more coordinated support. Fifteen agencies have already joined, with a further 22 due to come on board shortly.

Call for community support

The charity is also appealing for donations, warning that demand for foodbank and advice services remains high across East Surrey despite the area’s perceived affluence.

Rising living costs, accessibility barriers and ongoing inequalities are continuing to drive need, while food donations have fallen. Good Company says regular contributions, even small ones, can help ensure local people are able to access essential support.

“Every contribution, however modest, helps ensure that local people can access the help and support they need, whatever their circumstances. Together, we can build a fairer, more compassionate community where no one is left to struggle alone.”

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Epsom & Ewell voters urged to prepare for historic Surrey elections

2 April 2026

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Residents in Epsom & Ewell are being urged to “get ready to vote” ahead of major local government elections on Thursday 7 May 2026, which will shape how the borough is governed for years to come.

The vote will determine who represents the area on the new East Surrey Council, one of two unitary authorities set to replace Surrey’s current two-tier system in April 2027. Epsom & Ewell will join Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge within the new East Surrey authority.

The change marks the end of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council as a standalone authority, with all local services — from bin collections and housing to roads, education and social care — brought under a single council structure.

A decisive moment for local representation

The councillors elected in May will serve for five years and will initially operate as part of a “shadow authority”, taking key decisions on budgets, council tax, governance structures and staffing ahead of the new council formally taking over in April 2027.

For Epsom & Ewell residents, the elections carry particular weight. The borough has long been dominated by Residents’ Association councillors, but the move to a much larger East Surrey authority — covering a wider political landscape — is expected to dilute that local dominance.

With 72 councillors representing 36 wards across East Surrey, voters will elect two representatives per ward under a first-past-the-post system. The outcome will influence not only local priorities but how strongly Epsom & Ewell’s voice is heard within the new regional structure.

What changes — and what doesn’t

Despite the scale of reform, day-to-day services will continue as normal until April 2027. Existing borough and county councillors will remain in post until then, meaning residents should not see immediate changes to service delivery.

However, decisions made by the newly elected councillors over the next year — including financial planning and organisational structure — will shape how services are delivered in the future.

The elections are also part of a broader shift towards devolution, with proposals for a Surrey-wide strategic authority expected to follow, potentially bringing additional powers over transport, adult education and economic planning.

Key deadlines for voters

To take part in the election, residents must be registered to vote by midnight on 20 April 2026. Voting can take place in person, by post or by proxy.

Those voting in person will need to bring valid photo identification, such as a passport, driving licence or older person’s bus pass. Voters without suitable ID can apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate by 5pm on 28 April.

Applications for postal votes must be submitted by 5pm on 21 April, while proxy vote applications close at 5pm on 28 April.

“Don’t miss your chance”

Election officials are encouraging residents not to miss the opportunity to shape the future of local government.

Mari Roberts-Wood, Returning Officer for the East Surrey elections, said: “Don’t miss your chance to have your say in these important elections. This is your opportunity to choose who represents you on issues that directly affect your day-to-day life in your local area.”

With Epsom & Ewell set to lose its borough council and be absorbed into a much larger authority, the May vote represents one of the most significant changes to local democracy in the area for decades.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Photo: Dog at a polling station. Chris Caulfield

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Epsom Hospital to “merge” with St Georges in Tooting?

2 April 2026



A major NHS reorganisation affecting Epsom residents appears to have been approved behind closed doors, with no public announcement or consultation to date.

Information shared with the *Epsom and Ewell Times* indicates that St George’s Hospital is set to formally merge with Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust under plans approved by their boards on 5 March.

The proposal, described in NHS terms as a “strategic outline case”, is understood to be the first formal step towards a full merger. If progressed, it would ultimately result in Epsom and St Helier ceasing to exist as a separate organisation, with all services brought under a single management structure.

The development was first reported by Putney News, which described the move as having been agreed “behind closed doors” and without any public announcement or consultation. According to that report, no press release has yet been issued and residents have not been formally informed.

Financial pressures driving change

Documents referenced in the material seen by EET suggest the move is being driven by mounting financial pressures across the hospital group.

The combined shortfall is reported to be around £176 million for the current financial year. While government support has historically offset much of this gap, those payments are now being phased out. St George’s has reportedly been given two years to break even, while Epsom and St Helier has been given three.

Epsom and St Helier is also said to be under formal NHS England supervision in relation to its finances, waiting lists and emergency care performance.

No public consultation announced

Despite the scale of the proposed change, there appears to have been no public consultation process announced.

Material circulated internally suggests that staff have been informed and Integrated Care Boards briefed, but that wider public engagement has not yet taken place.

The apparent lack of transparency may raise concern locally, particularly given previous assurances when the two trusts began closer working in 2021 that they would remain separate statutory organisations.

MP response focuses on patient care

Epsom and Ewell’s MP Helen Maguire said she was aware of the developing proposal but emphasised that patient care must remain the priority.

She said: “I am aware the Trust has put a business case forward to the NHS on the possibility of a merger. From my perspective, my primary concern lies with ensuring that regardless of administrative decisions, residents across my constituency and the wider Trust area continue to receive the high-quality healthcare they deserve. I look forward to meeting with Michael Pantlin to discuss these priorities, and will continue to engage with key stakeholders throughout the process to ensure consistency of service provision.”

Her comments suggest the proposal remains under consideration at NHS England level, with further discussions expected.

Hospital Management Response

A spokesperson for St George’s, Epsom and St Helier Hospitals and Health Group (gesh) said: “We have not agreed to merge – at this stage, we have agreed an intention to submit a strategic case for merger to NHS England, asking them to

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approve developing a full business case.

“This builds on the work we have already done to strengthen the ties between both Trusts – sharing expertise and resources, whilst leveraging the strengths of our services to further improve patient care.

“We want to reassure people that there are no related planned changes to our services.”

Long-term implications for services

If it proceeded the merger could have significant implications for how services are delivered across south-west London and Surrey, including for Epsom residents relying on local provision.

It also comes against the backdrop of delays to the long-promised Specialist Emergency Care Hospital in Sutton, now expected to open in the 2030s rather than mid-2020s.

While NHS leaders are reported to view the merger as a route to achieving Foundation Trust status and improving financial stability, questions remain about how local services may be affected and when residents will be formally consulted.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Mayor opens Primark in Epsom

2 April 2026



Primark has opened a major new store in Epsom’s Ashley Centre, drawing large crowds on its first day and appearing to confirm earlier predictions by the Epsom and Ewell Times 13th May 2022, about the likely direction of the town’s retail future.

More than 1,000 people queued within the first half hour of opening on 25 March, as the fashion retailer launched its 199th UK store. The 31,400 sq ft outlet spans two floors and offers clothing, accessories, beauty products and homeware, alongside a Click & Collect service.

The arrival of Primark follows ongoing speculation about how large retail spaces in the Ashley Centre would be repurposed in the wake of high street changes. In the Epsom and Ewell Times feature examining potential replacements for the former House of Fraser site, Primark was identified as one of the most plausible candidates to anchor the centre’s future retail mix.

That prediction now appears well-founded, with the brand’s scale and footfall potential matching the need for a strong “destination” retailer in the town centre. Independent research cited by the company suggests Primark attracts millions of weekly visits nationwide and can generate additional spending in surrounding shops and restaurants.

Any story about Primark is the most avidly followed story in our publication.

The new store has also brought local employment, with more than 90 staff recruited, including a number returning to work after career breaks and some entering employment for the first time.

Store manager Ewa Klepczuk said the team was “excited to finally open our doors” in Epsom and thanked the community for its early support, while the owners of the Ashley Centre described the opening as a “significant moment” that would boost footfall and strengthen the centre’s position.

For Epsom’s retail landscape, the development may mark more than just a new shop opening. It signals a shift towards

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high-volume, value-led brands as the backbone of town centre recovery—an outcome the Epsom and Ewell Times had already flagged as the most likely path forward.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Primark to open in Epsom

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On the Primarks Epsom, ready, steady, go 25th March

Rare moth rediscovery secures conservation status for Epsom’s Manor Open Space

2 April 2026



Manor Open Space in Epsom has been designated a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI), recognising its ecological value and role in supporting wildlife across the borough.

The designation, made by the Surrey Local Sites Partnership, highlights several important features of the site, including veteran oak trees and the presence of the extremely rare moth *Coleophora conspicuella* (Knapweed Case-bearer). The species had not been recorded in Surrey for around 100 years before its rediscovery at the site in 2024.

The open space also plays a key role as a wildlife corridor, linking Epsom Common and Horton Country Park local nature reserves. This connection enables the movement of species between habitats and strengthens the borough’s wider ecological network.

SNCIs, also known as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation or Local Wildlife Sites, are non-statutory designations that identify areas of high biodiversity value. While not legally protected in themselves, they are recognised in planning and conservation decisions and help safeguard important habitats and species at a local level.

Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley), Chair of the Environment Committee, said the designation reflected both the ecological importance of the site and the work of those maintaining it.

“We are proud that Manor Open Space has been recognised for the important role it plays in supporting resilient ecosystems across the borough,” she said. “Through our Biodiversity Action Plan, we can protect our natural heritage, and the presence of veteran oak trees along with the discovery of extremely rare moth species reflects the dedication of everyone involved in caring for our habitats.

“This SNCI designation is a testament to the hard work, diligence and passion of our Countryside team, partners and much valued volunteers who continually strive to improve our green spaces for the benefit of our community. Their commitment ensures that these habitats will be enjoyed for many years to come.”

The Surrey Local Sites Partnership, which oversees the selection of SNCIs, brings together Surrey County Council, Surrey Wildlife Trust, district and borough councils and independent ecological experts under the Surrey Nature Partnership. The group identifies and manages both nature conservation sites and Regionally Important Geological Sites across the county.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Biodiversity Action Plan aims to protect, maintain and enhance biodiversity locally, taking into account priorities at regional, national and international levels. This work sits alongside the council’s Climate Change Action Plan 2025–2029, which sets out measures to reduce emissions and promote environmental sustainability across the borough.

Sam Jones – Reporter

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Photo: Manor-Open-Space-springtime-Cuckoo-Flower-in-the-foreground

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Junior golf booming at Epsom’s Horton Golf Park as membership tops 300

2 April 2026



Junior golf is thriving in Epsom, with Horton Golf Park announcing that its junior membership has now surpassed 300 young players.

The milestone reflects a steady rise in participation among local families, with the venue becoming an increasingly popular destination for children and teenagers looking to take up the sport in a relaxed and accessible setting.

Set within the Horton Country Park estate, the facility offers a mix of golf opportunities suited to beginners and developing players alike. Its two courses — a full-length 18-hole course and a shorter 9-hole layout — alongside a floodlit driving range and practice areas, provide a flexible environment for juniors to learn and progress at their own pace.

The club’s efforts have been formally recognised, with Horton Golf Park designated as a Junior Hub by England Golf and the UK Golf Federation. The status highlights its role in nurturing young talent and widening access to the game within the community.

Golf Operations lead Phill Wilmer, who works closely with many of the club’s younger members, said the growth has been striking.

“It’s fantastic to see so many young people enjoying golf and spending time at the club. Golf is a brilliant sport for developing confidence, patience and social skills, and we’re proud to see so many local juniors embracing the game.”

General Manager Gareth Bullock echoed that sentiment, pointing to the strong family appeal of the venue.

“We’re incredibly proud to now have more than 300 junior members. It’s great to see so many local children and families choosing Horton Golf Park as a place to play golf and spend time together.”

Horton Golf Park has built its reputation on accessibility, offering affordable pay-and-play options alongside structured coaching programmes and junior pathways. Its informal, family-friendly ethos contrasts with more traditional private members’ clubs, helping to break down barriers often associated with the sport.

With numbers continuing to rise, the club says it is keen to expand opportunities for young players even further, reinforcing its position as one of the borough’s key grassroots sporting hubs.

Further details about junior membership and coaching opportunities can be found on the club’s website.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Surrey leaders promise smooth transition to unitaries

2 April 2026



On Friday 13 March, the East and West Surrey Joint Committees met to continue preparations for the transition to new unitary councils ahead of “vesting day” on 1 April 2027.

The committees, made up of councillors from existing Surrey authorities, are meeting monthly to lay the groundwork for the creation of East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council. This interim phase will continue until Shadow Authorities are formally established following elections in May 2026. The focus is on ensuring stability and effective planning during a period of significant local government change.

Financial pressures and planning challenges highlighted

Members reviewed progress from the Implementation Team (Programme Board), which is overseeing the transition. A draft illustrative financial baseline was presented, offering an early indication of the financial position the new councils are likely to inherit.

The report highlighted that both East and West Surrey are expected to face ongoing financial pressures, including rising demand for services and constrained resources—challenges that would exist irrespective of reorganisation.

Particular concern was noted in parts of West Surrey, where historic debt issues—especially those linked to Woking—will require careful management. The importance of robust governance, financial oversight and continued engagement with government on potential debt support was emphasised.

A recent ministerial letter from Alison McGovern MP confirmed that the government would “continue to explore what further debt support is required at a later point”.

Scrutiny and governance arrangements

Looking ahead to the Shadow Authority phase, councillors discussed how implementation plans will be reviewed. Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committees will be established to provide independent challenge to decision-making, helping ensure plans are realistic, legally sound and properly risk-assessed.

A draft timetable for meetings during the Shadow period was also considered, with initial meetings expected to begin from 20 May 2026.

Devolution discussions continue

Surrey councils are continuing discussions with government on a potential countywide Strategic Authority, which could bring greater local control over areas such as economic growth.

Councils will consider whether to submit an expression of interest for a “Foundational Strategic Authority” — a non-mayoral model that could act as a stepping stone towards a future mayoral arrangement.

Leaders emphasise stability and strong foundations

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council and Senior Responsible Officer for the programme, said the work was about “planning ahead, being honest about the challenges, and making sure the new councils start on a strong footing.”

Cllr Bridget Kendrick, Chair of the East Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Mole Valley District Council, said the focus was on “clear programme governance” and “strengthening scrutiny and oversight” to ensure a smooth transition.

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Chair of the West Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Woking Borough Council, added that the priority was to establish “two stable and resilient councils… providing confidence, continuity and stability through the transition.”

What happens next

The next meetings of the Joint Committees are due to take place in April, with dates and venues to be confirmed.

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Meetings will continue to be webcast.

Background: what the changes mean

From April 2027, Surrey's current two-tier system of county, district and borough councils will be replaced by two unitary authorities—East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council—each responsible for delivering all local services.

Elections for the new councils will take place on 7 May 2026, after which elected members will act as Shadow Authorities to oversee the transition.

Until then, residents will continue to access services through existing councils in the usual way.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Local LibDem leader slams Helen Maguire MP in shock resignation

2 April 2026



In a shock development in the politics of Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrat Council Group Leader Cllr **James Lawrence** (College Ward) has resigned from his Party and joined the growing Independent Group on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

The Independent Group, led by former Residents Association Councillor **Alex Coley** (Ruxley), has been joined by ex-LibDem and long serving Councillor **Julie Morris** (College) and former Residents Association Councillor for Nonsuch Ward, **Christine Howells**.

The Liberal Democrats once formed the largest opposition group on the Council. Now the group is the smallest. The Independent Group has four councillors, Labour four and the Liberal Democrats just two.

The first version of this report overlooked the little known fact that Cllr **Chris Watson** (Ewell Court) defected from the RA to Labour on 10th February this year.

The Residents Association remain predominant with the remainder of the total 35 seats in the Chamber.

In Cllr James Lawrence's resignation letter he takes wounding Parthian shots at both Epsom and Ewell's first woman and first Liberal Democrat MP **Helen Maguire**, who was elected in the July 2024 General Election and her Party's leader. He pulls no punches in his critique of Sir **Ed Davey**, MP for Kingston-Upon-Thames.

Resignation letter of Cllr James Lawrence

Dear Resident

I joined the Liberal Democrats in 2018 because I believed that the Party had both the strong intellectual foundations

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Britain needs and the pragmatism to achieve them. A principled commitment to liberalism, socially responsible markets, and devolved power differentiated the Liberal Democrats from other parties. Moreover, the Party's understanding that it existed to influence politics from the outside by winning public support for important issues was tried and tested.

In 2023, I decided to play an active role in this mission and stood for election. I was fortunate enough to win and become a councillor representing College Ward. Serving the community where I grew up has been a great privilege. I'm proud to have co-led a cross-party coalition working for better outcomes at the Chalk Pit site, increased Council lease scrutiny, and passed a motion requiring all urgent council decisions to be published. Navigating an overly complex housing payments system to keep a roof over the head of a vulnerable resident is an experience that will stay with me.

While I have been doing all I can to serve our community, I have unfortunately been undermined by both the national and local Liberal Democrats Party. Under Ed Davey's leadership, the Party has become rudderless. What do the Liberal Democrats stand for? I wish I could tell you. Davey's Mr. Tumble-style stunts cover up a lack of direction, policy, and commitment to seriously engage with the challenges this country faces, particularly the economy. As the two-party system collapses, the Liberal Democrats should stand to benefit. But Davey's Party is incapable of taking advantage, and given its purposelessness, that's probably a good thing.

Locally, I have been disappointed with our Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament who seems more interested in leafleting and electioneering than engaging in meaningful policy change at the national level. Having worked with the MP closely on local matters, I am also concerned by her ability to alienate volunteers who freely give up their time. While I was pleased to support the successful campaign to displace the Conservatives in Epsom and Ewell, I now feel a sense of guilt at having played a role in enabling her to be elected.

For these reasons, I am resigning from the Liberal Democrat Party with immediate effect. I sincerely hope that the Party returns to the seriousness of its past, but I unfortunately no longer have faith it will. I will continue to serve the people of College Ward and the Borough to the best of my ability as an Independent councillor.

James Lawrence

In response Helen Maguire has issued the following statement:

I understand that Cllr James Lawrence has decided to step away from the Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrats and will finish his term as an independent.

While I wish him well in his future endeavours, I am saddened to see his portrayal of my values and priorities as a Member of Parliament working for local matters at a national level.

The feedback I receive from local residents is consistently positive. I frequently receive correspondence from constituents who value the regular literature they are sent informing them of the important work I am conducting in Parliament. It is equally vital to me that constituents know how accessible and visible I am as their MP, engaging with them on their doorsteps each week. It is because I am an MP who strives to be a truly present voice within Epsom and Ewell that I am able to understand these concerns and raise them at a national level.

I recently met a constituent during one of my canvassing sessions, who told me that they were having difficulties accessing a breast cancer drug. I raised this issue directly with the responsible Minister, who then intervened with our local NHS organisation, and consequently the constituent received their medication. I do not need to debate the merits of consistent canvassing when the importance of it is so clear in cases such as this.

I am proud to be a very visible and active Member of Parliament within the Epsom and Ewell community, and will continue to fight for every single one of my constituents at both a local and national level.

Helen Maguire MP

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Prominent Residents Association Councillor leaves the fold

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Epsom and Ewell Council transparency row erupts as council backs publication of urgent decisions

2 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has agreed to improve transparency over so-called “urgent decisions” following a heated debate that revisited the controversy surrounding the Rainbow Centre and allegations of secrecy over a £500,000 liability.

At its Full Council meeting on 12th March, councillors voted to support a motion calling for a clearer and more timely system for publishing decisions taken by officers under delegated authority.

The move follows months of criticism over how urgent decisions have been handled and disclosed, culminating in disputes over a confidential document linked to the Rainbow Centre.

Motion seeks clearer publication of decisions

The motion, proposed by Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) and seconded by Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), called for a formal process to ensure that officer decisions are properly recorded and made publicly accessible.

Lawrence told councillors that while urgent decisions are currently noted in committee papers, the underlying decision notices themselves are not published in a timely or transparent way. “The decision notice itself isn’t given… that is not at all in the same timeframe as a decision notice from committee,” he said. He added that in the past it could take months, or even up to a year, for such decisions to be reported.

The motion proposed that the Chief Executive develop a process for publishing these decisions, with an update to be reported back to council later in the year.

Legal compliance questioned

The debate turned on whether the council is already complying with transparency laws. Lawrence said the current arrangements were “legally questionable”, pointing to regulations requiring a written record of officer decisions to be produced “as soon as reasonably practicable”.

However, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol), chair of the Standards and Constitution Committee, rejected claims that the council was acting unlawfully. He told the meeting that the council’s existing practice – recording urgent decisions in committee agendas and reporting them annually – complied with the regulations. “The custom and practice of this council… satisfies this requirement,” he said.

The Mayor also intervened to clarify that officers believed no law had been broken.

Rainbow Centre controversy looms over debate

The discussion was heavily influenced by the ongoing controversy surrounding the Rainbow Centre, where an urgent decision was used to deal with issues linked to the site.

That episode has been the subject of previous reporting by the Epsom & Ewell Times, including concerns about a secret document referring to substantial potential dilapidation costs – reported to be in the region of £500,000.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) directly linked the motion to that issue, accusing the council of a broader lack of transparency. “We’ve had an ongoing shambles over the so-called urgent decision over the Rainbow Centre,” he said.

He alleged that key information had not been disclosed and suggested there had been no intention to publish the document. “The reality is… there was never any intention to publish the document in the first place,” he said. Ames also described what he called a “growing transparency crisis” within the council.

Since 20th January Epsom and Ewell Times has awaited disclosure from Epsom and Ewell Borough Council of information that will throw light on the Rainbow Centre controversy. Despite a 20 day legal limit under the Freedom of Information Act to disclose and our concession to accept delay where some items sought may take longer to find, we have received no disclosures of even readily available information.

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Calls for greater openness

Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), who seconded the motion, said he had been investigating urgent decisions since discovering their limited visibility several years ago. “I accidentally discovered that they exist,” he said. He told councillors that hundreds of historic officer decisions had not been publicly disclosed, including some involving significant financial commitments. “Some of them record millions of pounds being spent… even non-exempt information has been withheld as a matter of course,” he said.

Coley said progress had been made in recent years, but argued further reform was needed to ensure proper compliance and public confidence.

Cross-party engagement leads to compromise

Despite the sharp exchanges, the motion itself reflected a degree of cross-party cooperation. Both Lawrence and Coley acknowledged that they had worked with Councillor Beckett and officers to reach a compromise. Beckett, in turn, thanked them for their “time and patience” in developing the proposal.

The agreed approach stops short of declaring the current system unlawful, instead tasking the Chief Executive with designing an improved publication process.

Motion carried by council

The motion was approved by councillors, signalling a clear intention to increase transparency over urgent and delegated decisions. It requires the council to develop a system for publishing decisions in a more accessible and timely way, subject to the usual rules on confidential or exempt information. An update on progress is expected later in the year.

Wider implications

The debate highlights continuing concerns about governance and transparency at the council during its final years before abolition under Surrey’s local government reorganisation.

The Rainbow Centre episode appears to have acted as a catalyst for change, bringing the issue of urgent decisions into sharper public focus.

While the council maintains it has acted within the law, the adoption of the motion suggests a recognition that existing arrangements have not met public expectations. As one councillor put it during the debate, the issue is not only legality but trust.

With further major decisions expected before the transition to a new unitary authority, the way those decisions are recorded and disclosed is likely to remain under close scrutiny.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related reports:

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Epsom and Ewell Council put in proportion

2 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved changes to the political balance of its committees following further shifts in councillor allegiances, amid continuing tensions within the ruling Residents’ Association group.

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The decision, taken at Full Council on 12 March, reflects the latest change in group composition after another RA councillor, **Christine Howells** (Nonsuch), moved to sit as an independent.

The adjustment of committee seats – known as proportionality – is a routine requirement when political group numbers change. However, the debate revealed deeper concerns about control, transparency and internal stability within the council.

Rebalancing committees after defections

Introducing the report, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol)said the changes were necessary to reflect the council's evolving political makeup. "As a result of changes within the political representation within this council, there has been a need to review the proportionality sitting on committees," he told members.

The revised allocations had been agreed between group leaders and were presented for formal approval by the full council.

Councillors approved the updated distribution of seats, ensuring that representation on committees broadly reflects the current balance of political groups.

Dispute over whether seats belong to parties or individuals

The debate exposed a technical but significant disagreement about whether committee places belong to political parties or to individual councillors.

Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) argued that while parties are allocated seats proportionately, it is the council that appoints individuals to those positions. "It is not the party being appointed, it is the person," he said, adding that councillors who change political group should not automatically lose their place on committees.

He pointed to examples in the report where individuals had been nominated to seats allocated to a particular party, suggesting this supported his interpretation.

But Councillor **Rachel King** (RA, Town) rejected that view, insisting that committee places are fundamentally party allocations. "Seats are for parties, not for people," she said, adding that parties retain the right to nominate replacements if councillors change allegiance. She said the arrangements had been agreed by group leaders and urged councillors to support the proposals.

Tensions over substitutions and control

The issue of substitutions – where councillors stand in for others at meetings – also proved contentious. Opposition councillors criticised what they described as inconsistent or politically motivated handling of substitutions following recent defections.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) said the situation had become "farcical", alleging that rules were being stretched to maintain control. "The clique that runs this council has a special talent for alienating members… bending the rules," he said. He linked the proportionality changes to wider political instability, suggesting the Residents' Association group was "bleeding members".

The debate reflects a broader struggle over influence as the RA group's long-standing dominance of the council comes under increasing pressure.

Background: shifting political landscape

The latest changes follow defections from the Residents' Association group over recent months, with councillors moving to sit as independents or aligning with opposition groups. The departure of **Christine Howells** (Independent Nonsuch) from the Residents' Association further alters the balance, reducing the RA group's numbers and requiring another recalculation of committee representation.

Under local government law, councils must ensure that committee seats are allocated in proportion to the size of political groups, as far as practicable. This means that each defection can trigger a reshuffle of committee places and, potentially, influence over key decisions.

Vote confirms new balance

Councillors approved the revised proportionality arrangements, including updated committee memberships.

A separate vote on one recommendation – relating to specific appointments – was carried by 15 votes to eight, with four abstentions, indicating some continuing division within the chamber.

Despite the disagreements aired during the debate, the council formally adopted the new structure, bringing committee representation into line with the current political balance.

Ongoing instability ahead of reorganisation

The debate highlights a council in a degree of political flux as it approaches both local elections and the planned abolition of the borough under Surrey's local government reorganisation.

With further changes in group membership still possible, additional reviews of proportionality may be required in the coming months.

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The shifting balance of power on committees could prove significant in the council's final year, particularly as it continues to make decisions on major issues before handing over responsibilities to the new unitary authority in 2027.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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An independent view on Epsom and Ewell Council's future

Prominent Residents Association Councillor leaves the fold

Epsom's empty and second homes face local tax increases

2 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved a 2.98% increase in its share of Council Tax for 2026/27, alongside new measures to penalise empty properties and second homes, but not without some questioning from councillors over the purpose and clarity of the changes. (Strategy and Resources Committee 27th January.) The increase equates to £6.93 a year for a Band D household, keeping within the government's referendum limit and adding around 58p per month to bills. While modest in isolation, the rise sits within a wider package aimed at strengthening council finances and aligning local policy with other Surrey authorities ahead of the planned move to unitary government.

The more contentious element of the decision was the tightening of rules on empty homes and second properties. From April 2026, owners of empty and unfurnished properties will no longer receive a one-month exemption and will face a 100% Council Tax premium after one year, effectively doubling their bill. From April 2027, the same 100% premium will apply to second homes. Introducing the policy, Committee Chair Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) said: "It's something that the rest of the boroughs and districts in Surrey are already doing… coming up to unitary it's now proposed that we do do it and align ourselves ready for the unity proposal."

Although the measures were approved unanimously, several councillors probed the reasoning and operation of the policy. Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) questioned whether the changes were primarily about raising income or achieving social outcomes such as reducing homelessness and increasing housing supply, asking whether the Council was "trying to achieve any of those things, or is it simply about… increasing the income that we get." In response, Cllr Dallen indicated the policy served both purposes, noting that while the number of empty homes locally is limited, "every property is another family home," and officers confirmed that bringing homes back into use remains an objective.

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) also raised detailed questions about how the policy would work in practice, particularly the rules around when a property is considered occupied and how time limits on empty status are reset. He highlighted potential ambiguity in the wording of the policy documents, suggesting that the distinction between a property being "substantially furnished" and actually occupied could lead to confusion. While confirming his support for the policy in principle, he sought reassurance that the expected income—estimated at around £29,000—would exceed the administrative cost of implementing the scheme.

The discussion reflected a broader concern among some members about balancing financial necessity with fairness and clarity. While there was no outright opposition to the proposals, the debate revealed differing emphases: some councillors focused on revenue generation and alignment with Surrey-wide practice, while others stressed the importance of ensuring the policy delivers genuine housing benefits and is clearly understood by residents.

In the end, the committee approved the recommendations without dissent, confirming both the Council Tax increase and the new premiums on empty and second homes as part of the authority's budget-setting process for the coming financial year.

Sam Jones – Reporter

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