

Classroom to Cruise: Epsom Student Wins Luxury Family Trip

5 May 2026



A Nescot student has won a luxury seven-night family cruise after taking part in an innovative work experience programme that swaps the classroom for life at sea.

Travel and Tourism students from **North East Surrey College of Technology** (Nescot) in Epsom joined peers from Itchen College, Southampton, on a five-day river cruise through Germany and the Netherlands as part of the Cruise Career Springboard initiative. The programme brings together education and the cruise industry, giving students hands-on experience while promoting careers in the sector.

During the trip aboard the VIVA Enjoy, students were tasked with creating social media content, planning excursions, and developing marketing ideas aimed at attracting younger travellers. The experience combined practical learning with the realities of working in a fast-moving hospitality and tourism environment.

Among the group was 17-year-old **Jordyn Leyland McKenzie**, whose work stood out and ultimately secured her the programme's top prize — an all-inclusive seven-night cruise for her family on the Rhine or Danube.

Jordyn said she had little idea what to expect when she first joined the programme.

"When I first joined the Cruise Career Springboard programme as part of our Travel and Tourism course, I had no idea I'd actually get the opportunity to go on a cruise. We found out later that a small group of us would get that chance by producing a presentation which impressed our tutors. I was over the moon when I found out I was one of the lucky ones."

Reflecting on the trip itself, she described it as far more immersive than she had imagined.

"We went on a four-day cruise on the VIVA Enjoy. On the first day, we had to post snapshots of the cruise on our social media stories. We also made a small video showing the rooms and the excursions, which I ended up using in my final presentation. My personal highlights were definitely the beautiful three-course meals, the hot tub on the top deck, and going on a bike ride in Amsterdam using the bikes VIVA kept on the boat. We saw so much, it felt like we were there for ages — it was just amazing."

After returning to the UK, students were invited to compete for the top prize through a second presentation. Jordyn took a creative approach, producing a TikTok-style promotional video aimed at younger audiences, alongside a quiz and a mock brand partnership idea.

"I adored the first experience so much, I was 100% up for the challenge," she said. "I did a TikTok video in an 'influencer style' to show how they could promote the cruise to younger people. I also created a quiz and an example of a brand partnership that might work for the company."

The result was announced during an online meeting at Nescot, with students gathered in a classroom and judges joining via video call.

"We had to wait a month to find out the results. We were all dressed smartly at college and the judges were on a Zoom call. When they eventually said my name, I didn't even hear it at first until I saw everyone looking at me. I was lost for words. After the call, they filmed me ringing my mum who was so excited. I can't even believe it's real."

She said the experience had a lasting impact on her confidence and ambitions.

"The Cruise Career Springboard experience has pushed me out of my comfort zone and really boosted my confidence. It's been incredible, and now I get to treat my family to a seven-night, all-inclusive trip. I'm just so grateful for the opportunity."

Julie Kapsalis MBE, Principal and CEO of Nescot, said the programme demonstrates the value of giving students real-world opportunities beyond the classroom.

"We always work to give our students real-world experiences and swapping the classroom for a cruise must be one of the most exciting we've ever offered," she said. "The programme develops confidence, self-belief and communication skills, while also giving the industry insight into how to attract a younger generation of customers."

Industry representatives involved in judging also praised the quality of the students' work. Michelle Daniels of VIVA Cruises said she took away ideas for her marketing team, while mentor Graham Sadler highlighted the transformation in students' confidence and engagement over the course of the programme.

The Cruise Career Springboard initiative, founded by Matthew and Edwina Lonsdale, brings together education providers

and cruise industry professionals, with nearly 100 individuals contributing their time to support young people considering careers at sea.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Luxury spa and restaurant coming to Ockley

5 May 2026



A “beautiful” and “fantastic” high-end luxury hotel, spa and fine dining restaurant set in the Surrey countryside has been approved.

Gatton Manor and Country Club will be transformed as part of a £41 million project to demolish the closed hotel and failing golf course and replace them with 81 guest rooms, two restaurants, and a spa featuring indoor and wild swimming pools, a gym, and treatment and relaxation areas.

The 22-hectare site near Ockley is expected to generate around 290 construction jobs during the two-year build, followed by 145 permanent roles once the development is operational.

Planning officers told Mole Valley District Council’s April development committee that the proposal would create a destination venue in the borough and bring significant investment into the rural economy. They added: “It is such a beautiful site, it is such a large site, it has got woodland, open areas, it is really a lovely, lovely, rural area and because of its size and the amount of landscape it is more than capable of absorbing this amount of development.”

In addition to the hotel, new facilities will be open to the public, including a fine dining restaurant and gym. The scheme also includes two tennis courts and three padel courts, with up to 100 gym memberships offered at preferential rates to residents living within 3km of the site.

Access to the hotel and spa will be via Standon Lane, linking the A29 Stane Street with Horsham Road. The existing hotel closed in 2022, and its adjoining 18-hole golf course had already been earmarked for closure regardless of the planning outcome.

Officers noted the development would also support businesses further along the supply chain. However, some residents objected, raising concerns about the impact on the openness of the countryside and increased pressure on local roads.

Developers acknowledged the loss of the golf course was regrettable but said it had been operating at a loss for several years and was no longer viable.

Councillor Roger Adams (Liberal Democrat, Bookham West) said: “With global warming and rising temperatures I suspect a lot of people seeking a holiday will no longer be heading to the Mediterranean but may well seek to have staycations, and where better to stay for a holiday than Surrey. We’ve got beautiful country here and we do need developments such as this. It will provide employment and enhance the visitor offer.”

Councillor Monica Weller (Liberal Democrat, Bookham West) added: “It really is quite fantastic as far as I’m concerned. A business like this has got to bring something really quite fantastic to our area and that is really to be welcomed.”

Plans for new hotel and spa in Ockley (MVDC)

Getting to the bottom of Epsom's Ashley Centre seating

5 May 2026



Shoppers in Epsom have voiced concern after seating in the Ashley Centre was removed and replaced as part of what management describes as an ongoing improvement programme.

One resident contacted the Epsom and Ewell Times to highlight the impact of the changes, particularly on older visitors and those with mobility difficulties who rely on regular rest points while shopping.

The resident said the removal of existing seating was “totally unexpected” and had caused “great concern”, adding that the centre is not only a retail space but also a social hub for many: “It is especially important for the older generation who visit the centre both to shop and to meet friends.”

Concerns were also raised about the suitability of the replacement seating. The resident described the new arrangements as inadequate in number and design, claiming that current provision allows seating for “only twelve people”, which they said was “totally unacceptable for such a busy shopping mall”, particularly following the arrival of a major new store increasing footfall.

The complaint further suggested that the materials used in the new seating may present practical issues: “The upholstery is unhygienic and it will easily get dirty in very little time,” the resident said.

In response, a spokesperson for the Ashley Centre said the changes were part of a planned upgrade and sought to reassure visitors that further improvements are imminent.

The spokesperson said: “We remain committed to providing a welcoming and accessible environment for all visitors and appreciate feedback from the local community. Recent seating changes form part of a planned improvement programme, with additional new seating due to be installed later this month to enhance comfort and accessibility for shoppers.”

The issue is likely to resonate with many regular users of the town centre, particularly those who depend on accessible facilities. Whether the promised additional seating will address residents’ concerns remains to be seen.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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

5 May 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



Caterham will try to force a rental of long empty Post Office

5 May 2026



A long-empty post office building in the heart of Caterham could finally be brought back into use under new council powers despite concerns over cost, risk and whether it will work.

Tandridge District councillors approved plans on March 26 to use a Government-backed High Street Rental Auction to force the former Station Avenue site to be let after years of vacancy in a prominent town centre location.

Members said the building has become a “significant eyesore” and a source of frustration for residents and businesses. Cllr Rob Spencer said: “You come to Caterham and you’re looking at a dead, old building,” adding the council had reached “the end of our tether” waiting for it to be occupied.

How the scheme works

Under the scheme, the council can designate the town centre for a High Street Rental Auction and formally notify the landlord. If the owner fails to secure a tenant, the council can step in to market and auction the lease, with a tenant potentially in place within around six months.

If successful, the move could bring the building back into use, boosting footfall and improving the high street.

However, officers warned the situation is complex. The property has multiple owners, and high asking rents and sale prices have deterred interest so far. They added it is still possible no suitable offers will come forward, even through an auction process.

Concerns over cost

The project is expected to cost around £15,000, with some money potentially recovered through grants and fees. Officers also noted the council cannot guarantee it will recover costs, with much of the expense tied up in staff time.

However, councillors raised concerns about where the funding would come from. Cllr Jeremy Pursehouse said: “It does sound like we’re rummaging down the side of the sofa.”

Mixed views from councillors

Opinion among members was divided. Cllr Mike Crane backed the proposal, calling it “a no-brainer” and suggesting the committee was “over-thinking” the issue.

But Cllr Perry Chotai warned the move could “set a precedent” and criticised the lack of detailed analysis. “This sounds a bit like a Trumpian style of analysis,” he said, calling for clearer evidence on risks and outcomes.

Despite reservations, councillors agreed to press ahead, viewing the auction as a potential way to revive the town centre even if success is not guaranteed and public money may be at risk.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Former Caterham post office. (Credit: Google street view)

Surrey University designs new long-life battery

5 May 2026



A new battery design that could significantly extend the range of electric vehicles and the lifespan of portable electronics has been developed by researchers at the University of Surrey's Advanced Technology Institute (ATI).

In a study published in ACS Applied Energy Materials, researchers introduce a novel lithium-ion battery anode that delivers some of the highest energy storage capacities reported for silicon-carbon nanotube systems, while maintaining stability over hundreds of charge cycles.

Lithium-ion batteries power much of modern technology - from smartphones and wearables to electric vehicles. Graphite, the most commonly used anode material, is stable but limited in the amount of energy it can store. Silicon, on the other hand, offers far greater capacity, but it expands during charging, causing it to crack and degrade over time.

To overcome this, the research team developed a new "Vertically Integrated Silicon-Carbon Nanotube" (VISiCNT) structure. The design grows dense forests of carbon nanotubes directly onto copper foil and coats them with a thin layer of silicon, creating a flexible, conductive scaffold that can absorb expansion while maintaining performance.

The resulting anode can store a very large amount of energy for its weight. In laboratory tests, it stored more than 3500 milliampere-hours per gram - close to the maximum possible for silicon and far higher than the graphite (370 mAh/g) used in today's batteries. It also demonstrated improved stability and performance over repeated charge cycles.

Dr Muhammad Ahmad, Research Fellow at the University of Surrey's ATI and lead author of the study, said:

"There's been a growing push for battery innovation, as many of today's technologies are limited by how much energy batteries can store. Our VISiCNT design offers a practical route to harness silicon's huge storage capability without sacrificing cycle life.

"This is a much-needed breakthrough, delivering very high capacity, fast charging and long-term durability, while bringing us closer to batteries that can power electric vehicles and everyday devices for much longer on a single charge."

A key advantage of the new approach is that the carbon nanotubes are grown directly onto copper - the material already used in commercial batteries - using a scalable manufacturing process. This could make it easier to integrate the technology into existing industrial production lines.

Professor Ravi Silva, Principal Investigator and Director of the ATI, said:

"This work is an important step towards bringing CNT-silicon anodes out of the lab and into real-world manufacturing. We can grow carbon nanotube structures directly onto copper foil at speed and tailor the silicon layer for stability, meaning this approach could be integrated into existing battery production lines with minimal disruption. The technology has clear potential not just for electric vehicles, but also for grid storage and smaller batteries used in microelectronics.

"We are very proud to present yet another CNT technology following our initial research in delivering the world's darkest material, VANTA-Black via the university spin-out Surrey NanoSystems Ltd., which is showing real-world impact of fundamental research funded by UKRI."

As demand for energy storage grows, batteries will need to store more energy, charge faster and last longer to support the UK's transition to Net Zero. The VISiCNT design offers a promising route to meeting these challenges and could be key to powering next-generation electric vehicles and phones.

Surrey University



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Mayor opens Primark in Epsom

5 May 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 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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Fennies Epsom Continues To Support Local Families As Demand For Quality Childcare Grows

5 May 2026



Established Fennies nursery on 1a Hook Road, Epsom, KT19 8TH, strengthens its role in the community while a new

Fennies setting opens nearby in Cheam.

For families across Epsom, access to reliable, high-quality Early Years education remains one of the most important decisions in the early stages of parenthood. At Fennies Epsom, Hook Road, that responsibility is one the team takes seriously. Over recent years, the nursery has become a familiar and trusted presence within the local community, supporting working parents while providing a nurturing environment where children can build confidence and a strong foundation for learning.



Situated on Hook Road, the nursery is designed to nurture every stage of a child's development. Children aged three months to five years can explore carefully curated rooms, including:

- Two Explorers rooms, with dedicated milk kitchen and nappy change areas
- One Discoverers Room designed to encourage independence
- One Creators room with dedicated reading areas
- One Inventors room with free-flow garden access
- A dedicated studio space for young chefs and budding artists to explore
- A vibrant outdoor space that encourages curiosity and creativity

Fennies Epsom follows a child-led approach, giving children the freedom to explore their interests while building independence and essential life skills. Families are invited to make the most of communal spaces such as the Parent Room, while practical touches like on-site buggy parking make everyday routines easier.

At the heart of the nursery's approach is a carefully considered curriculum designed to reflect both the needs of modern families and the curiosity of young children. Practitioners at Fennies Epsom, Hook Road focus on creating meaningful learning experiences that feel engaging and relevant, balancing structured opportunities with space for children to explore their own interests. The emphasis is on nurturing adaptable, confident individuals who feel secure in their environment and excited about learning.

"Blending child-led exploration with purposeful guidance, the curriculum celebrates imagination, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and STEM-inspired discovery," said Eleanor Richfield, Head of Education at Fennies. "It empowers children to communicate confidently and adapt to change, supporting children to enjoy the now whilst developing the lifelong skills they need to thrive."

Fennies Nurseries is also proud to announce the opening of its newest setting just 15 minutes down the road in Cheam. Fennies Cheam marks the group's 25th nursery, continuing more than three decades of delivering outstanding early learning experiences across London, Surrey, Kent, Middlesex and Berkshire.

With its passionate team, inspiring spaces and a focus on each child's individual journey, Fennies Cheam is ready to help families in the area feel supported and inspired every day. Located at 91 Worcester Road, Sutton, SM2 6QL, the nursery is accessible for busy, commuting parents.

"The garden at Fennies Cheam is amazing, and so much natural light fills the building," said Emma Carrington, Nursery Manager at Fennies Cheam. "We have lots of new resources, and the dedicated studio space will be a fantastic learning environment for the children."

To learn more about Fennies Cheam, book a tour, or register your interest by contacting enquiries@fennies.com.

Sponsored article Fennies Nurseries

Photo: Fennies Nursery in Hook Road Epsom

Surrey-wide plan aims to get thousands back into work

5 May 2026



A cross-county plan to bring thousands of people back into employment in Surrey has received backing from Surrey County Council and government ministers.

The Get Surrey Working Plan brings together key partners to support 26,900 economically inactive residents who want to work but currently face barriers to employment.

Although Surrey has a lower-than-average economic inactivity rate of 17.8% compared to the national average of 21.2%, around 131,000 working-age residents are not currently employed.

Government ministers and local leaders from across government, Jobcentre Plus, health services and business have pledged to work together to tackle the issue through a range of interventions. These include multi-million pound schemes such as Connect to Work, Skills Bootcamps and WorkWell.

A new online Skills, Training and Employment Portal, known as STEP Surrey, will provide streamlined access to services, helping residents find support, gain skills, secure employment or access assistance more easily.

The plan was formally launched by representatives from the One Surrey Growth Board at Redhill Jobcentre Plus.

It identifies key reasons why many working-age residents are not in employment, including long-term health conditions and caring responsibilities.

The plan also addresses a mismatch in skills, where many highly skilled professionals commute to London, leaving local employers struggling to fill vacancies. Sectors such as health and social care, automotive and technology are particularly affected.

To address this, the plan will deliver targeted business support and skills development programmes, helping employers fill vacancies while supporting workforce planning and more inclusive employment practices.

The soon-to-be devolved Adult Skills Fund will focus on priority sectors and identified skills gaps, enabling residents to gain qualifications aligned with local employer needs.

Young people without access to skills or further learning will receive early intervention support in schools, reducing the risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET), with clearer vocational pathways and work experience opportunities.

Matt Furniss, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth and Chair of the One Surrey Growth Board, said: "While the economic picture in Surrey is largely a positive one, we know that there are thousands of people out there who are currently out of work but not in employment.

"Through the Get Surrey Working, we're committed to breaking down those barriers and creating a truly inclusive labour market where everyone has the opportunity to access good quality employment and reach their full potential."

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Pat McFadden, said: "The Get Surrey Working Plan is a perfect example of how partners can come together to support people into work and help local businesses find the talent they need.

"Surrey is a county with real strengths - a thriving economy, top-class businesses and talented people - yet we know there are many more people who want to work but face barriers that hold them back.

"By bringing together local employers and support services we can reach people where they are and give them a genuine route into good work. This kind of practical, locally-led support is exactly what we need to get Britain working."

The plan has been developed through partnership working with public health teams, Jobcentre Plus, Surrey Chambers of Commerce, employment support providers and other stakeholders.

Its aim is to avoid duplication of services and ensure support reaches those who need it most, by coordinating employment and skills provision across Surrey into a clear, joined-up local offer.

Residents can access employment and skills support through the STEP Surrey portal at www.stepsurrey.co.uk

Surrey County Council



Representatives from the Surrey Growth Board launch the Get Surrey Working Plan

Support programme launched to help Surrey's high streets

5 May 2026



Dedicated support for high street businesses across Surrey to attract new customers, boost sales and drive growth is now available as part of wider efforts to strengthen and futureproof town centres.

The Surrey High Street Growth and Innovation Programme is open to a wide range of businesses, including independent retailers, start-ups, market traders, charities and social enterprises.

Funded by Surrey County Council's Economic Growth Fund and delivered by specialists Smarter Society and The Retail Group, the scheme offers free practical workshops, online resources and one-to-one tailored support.

There is a particular focus on 22 high streets across all 11 district and borough areas in Surrey, with targeted workshops designed to help businesses attract more customers, increase footfall, improve visibility and boost customer spend.

Businesses can register for support directly via the programme's enrolment form.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth at Surrey County Council, said: "High streets are the lifeblood of our communities. They're integral to the character and vitality of our towns and villages, which is why we're committed to supporting them alongside our district and borough partners and Business Improvement Districts.

"This programme is a real investment in the people behind Surrey's independent businesses, giving them the tools and knowledge to thrive - which is good for our economy, our residents and our communities."

The scheme has been developed in collaboration with economic development teams from district and borough councils, alongside representatives from Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) across Surrey.

Launched last month, the programme includes workshops running through February, March and April at key locations across the county.

The Smarter Society outreach team is already engaging directly with businesses on Surrey's high streets, meeting hundreds of owners face-to-face and signing retailers up for workshops.

Four free workshops are being held in each district and borough, covering practical topics such as increasing footfall, improving online and in-store visibility, making better use of social media and promotions, and planning for growth.

Workshops are also being streamed live online, with recordings available on demand.

In addition, a range of free toolkits, guides, templates and short videos is available via the Business Surrey website, alongside one-to-one support for businesses with more specific needs.

In the first few weeks of the programme, nearly 140 businesses have registered, with 75 already receiving support across five areas.

Geoff Baxter, Managing Director of Smarter Society, said: "The Surrey High Street Growth & Innovation Programme is gaining real momentum. Businesses across the county are engaging enthusiastically with our on-street support and workshops, and we're proud to see such strong early signs of growth and innovation on Surrey's high streets."

The programme is free and open to any business trading on a Surrey high street. Further information is available via the Business Surrey High Streets page, with direct registration also available through the programme's enrolment form.

Surrey County Council



Photo: Reps from Surrey CC, Smarter Society and Hello Dorking mark the delivery of the High Street Support scheme

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Three beers for Dorking

5 May 2026



Beer fans will be pumped to know that Dorking Halls will be able to offer customers a greater variety of booze after planning permission was secured to convert storage units into cellars. Antique hunters may be less than thrilled however. Mole Valley District Council has given itself the green light to convert the units at the northwest of the halls so they can be used by the town's flagship theatre. The block had been in long-term use by Dorking auctioneers P F Windibank to keep its wares and will force the company, which been based there for over half a century, to move elsewhere. Officers, who recommended the conversion be approved, said it would support the "popular leisure and cultural facility", Dorking Halls, and help its long-term viability.

They told the March development management committee: "They consider they need more (space), to provide a greater variety of drinks and they need more storage for beer kegs. The proposed change of use would support Dorking Halls and the wider town centre economy. Dorking Halls is an important venue for Mole Valley, it provides opportunities for leisure and recreation both for those living within and outside the district."

John Collins, speaking on behalf of the application, said the increased storage was needed due to the scale of activities and that revenues generated through bar sales underpinned the venue's viability. He said the Dorking Halls was cherished by the community and added: "The current cellarage was simply not adequate and more space needed to improve back of house operations and comfort within the facility. Being able to have a comfortable welcoming place with a decent bar is all part of that experience."

Councillors at the meeting expressed concern over how it would impact the town's antique scene - although that lies outside the committee's remit. Cllr Claire Malcomson (Liberal Democrat: Holmwoods and Beare Green) said: "I know Dorking Halls is an extremely precious asset that we have but I do also think this is going to (impact) some of the trade in Dorking. So I am not going to pass judgement or anything but I wanted to make that comment because I think this could be quite a loss for us." Cllr Kirstie Havard (Liberal Democrat: Capel, Leigh, Newdigate and Charlwood) added: "This application is causing great harm to that business they have been there for 80 years. It's arisen after the first phase of Dorking Halls (refurbishment) was completed and it was decided that space was needed, and I understand the reasons, but I'm very worried about Windibank and what they are losing, and it is very harmful to their business."

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Dorking Halls (image Google)