

## Surrey County Council workers to strike?



Staff at Surrey County Council could walk out after a “record number” of people backed strike action – unless the authority makes a significantly improved pay offer, unions have said.

For the last two years the workers at the council have been offered less than the National Joint Council (NJC) pay award and less than most other neighbouring councils, according to Unison.

Those working in local government and schools have their pay and other conditions are negotiated by the NJC. The Local Democracy Reporting Service understands that those offers were rejected.

Last year, turnout for a full-strike ballot fell 40 votes short of the threshold required for legal industrial action, and the pay settlement imposed without agreement.

This year, a consultative ballot of members, covering core Surrey County Council workers and support staff in Surrey maintained schools, concluded on Friday, March 1, and achieved enough votes with a 53 per cent turnout – with 87 per cent of members rejecting the 4 per cent average pay offer, and 91 per cent of those voting for strike action, record in Surrey.

Union representatives are due to meet next week and have said that unless staff receive a “significantly improved offer” they will “be recommending a vote for a full legal industrial action ballot over the next few weeks”.

Paul Couchman, branch secretary of Surrey Unison, said: “Our members are more frustrated and more angry than they have ever been. Voting over 90 per cent for potential strike action is unprecedented in Surrey. We hope the council will see the strength of feeling of their staff and reconsider their offer.

“If there is no significantly improved offer from the council in the next few days we will have no choice other than to go to a formal ballot for strike action, where we are confident our members will once again respond positively to a call for action.”

It comes as the county council’s new £30 million payroll system was reported to have left staff “wiping tears of frustration and helplessness” over missed payments.

The council brought in a new Enterprise Resource Planning system last June and said it had “experienced some issues relating to payroll” and that it had been working to improve the system but given its complexity, needed an ongoing programme of software upgrades and fixes to address issues that have arisen.

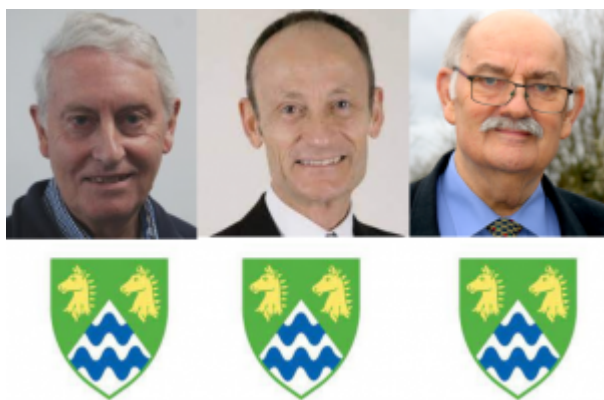
Mr Couchman added: “No doubt the anger and frustration over the payroll issues has added to the general cost of living crisis, making Surrey County Council employees vote in unprecedentedly high numbers for strike action.”

A spokesperson for Surrey said: “We are still in talks with the Trade Unions regarding the 2024/25 pay offer therefore it would be inappropriate to comment while these discussions are still ongoing.”

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## Civic awards at civic reception



The Epsom and Ewell Mayor’s civic reception took place at Bourne Hall, Ewell on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> March. The “great and the good” of the Borough, including Member of Parliament **Chris Grayling**, gathered at this special annual event that witnessed the conferment of the title of Alderman of Epsom and Ewell to three long-serving local councillors.



The ceremonies began with the Mayor's Active Citizen Award. The Mayor, Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court Ward), presented this year's award to **Barbara Lewis**, praising her selfless dedication to the community: "Barbara, born in Kingston, was instilled with a strong sense of altruism by her late mother. After attending Tiffin Girls Grammar School and serving in the civil service, Barbara settled in Ewell with her husband Martin, celebrating their upcoming Golden Wedding Anniversary. Barbara's commitment to her local area, Station Avenue, has been unwavering. Notably, she spearheaded efforts to provide scrubs, masks, and other essentials to frontline workers during the pandemic, and organized a heartwarming visit from Santa for children in her neighborhood. Barbara's involvement extends to various charitable endeavors, including Epsom Twinning Society and Epsom Rotary Club, and she even finds time to teach a Spanish class for the University of Third Age (U3A). Additionally, Barbara has dedicated herself to fundraising, notably supporting the Mayor's Charity Committee. Her generosity knows no bounds, always willing to help and support her community."



Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh), spoke up for **Chris Frost**, and welcomed him as an Honorary Alderman of Epsom and Ewell, recognizing his positive impact on local politics: “Chris’s journey in politics began in his youth, and his dedication led to his election to the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and later the Surrey County Council. Known for his community spirit, Chris spearheaded initiatives like the Interfaith Forum and the Epsom and Ewell Community Fund.”

Ms Dalton commended Chris’s wife, Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley), for her unwavering support and thanked his family for their presence. She expressed gratitude to all who supported Chris over the years, including council officers.



Eber Kington signs the book with Mayor and EEBC CEO Jackie King looking on.

Cllr **Peter O’Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) reflected on **Eber Kington’s** remarkable career, celebrating his induction as an Honorary Alderman: “Born in Battersea, Eber’s journey into local politics began in the 80s when he joined the Woodcote Residents’ Association, eventually becoming a respected councillor. Eber’s tenure was marked by his commitment to his constituents, often being the first point of contact for residents’ concerns. Despite his aversion to planning matters, Eber’s dedication to his community was unwavering. His tenure as Mayor in 1999 was memorable, highlighted by his unconventional but effective leadership style. Eber’s dedication to community service extends beyond politics, evident in his charity work and love for Chelsea Football Club.” Mr O’Donovan praised Eber’s integrity, noting his willingness to listen and support fellow councillors.



Finally, Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) spoke emotionally in praise of the late Mr **Clive Smitheram** who was awarded the Honour of Alderman of the Borough of Epsom and Ewell posthumously. Clive was a central figure in West Ewell having lived there for over 30 years with his wife Gill and family and although a proud Cornishman, Clive was someone who knew everyone locally and if he didn't know someone, he knew someone who did! Clive was a former police officer, having served 31 years in the service and was a retired community safety officer. As an active resident, it led to Clive being elected as a Resident Association Councillor for West Ewell serving for over 20 years, Clive was a former Mayor of Epsom and Ewell in 2010- 2011.

Mrs Smitheram receives the honour on behalf of the late Clive Smitheram.

All photos below heading courtesy Steven McCormick Photography

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## Local Government monopoly board at play?



Surrey County Council has added another building to its property portfolio after buying the Victoria Gate site from Woking Borough Council in a deal that will net the bankrupt authority more than £30 million.

The county has said it will not disclose how much it paid for the former McLaren site in Victoria Way, Woking, but the Epsom and Ewell Times understands the overall package will bring in about £32,250,000 - although the split between McLaren's early surrender of the premises and how much the county paid remains unclear.

It comes two months after Surrey County Council said it expected to add a further billion pounds of debt to its books as part of its capital programme, from £1.3 billion to £2.4bn by 2028/29.

Announcing the deal, the Surrey County Council said the purchase "underpins" its commitment to "efficiency, sustainability, and improved services" with the new site serving as its corporate office hub in north-west Surrey.

It now plans to put its old Quadrant Court site in Guildford Road up for sale in an effort to recoup some of its costs.

The deal is being seen as good news for Woking Borough Council as it nets more than £30m from the site, hopes to bring more people into the heart of the town centre, and potentially allow it to sell off its civic centre as it tries to pay back part of its own multibillion pound debt.

The county council expects staff to relocate to its latest acquisition later this year.

Councillor Natalie Bramhall, cabinet member for property, waste and infrastructure said, "This strategic move reaffirms Surrey County Council's commitment to creating a conducive work environment while aligning with our broader objectives of sustainability and improved service delivery."

Surrey said the decision is part of its overall vision to "provide services from a contemporary, agile environment that caters to the needs of both residents and employees" and that the Woking town centre location was optimal for both staff and residents due to its excellent access to public transport and car parking facilities.

Surrey County Council moved its headquarters from Kingston to Woodhatch Place in Reigate after acquiring the site for £50m. Other hubs across include Dakota in Brooklands Weybridge, and Fairmount House in Leatherhead.

The Leader of Woking Borough Council, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, said: "Asset rationalisation is a key part of the Council's Improvement and Recovery Plan agreed with Government.

"The sale of Victoria Gate delivers best value both in terms of return to the public purse and benefit to the community."

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## Boats on the canal "your time is up"?



Basingstoke Canal could stop leisure activities like boat hire and camping because they're not financially viable.

The 32-mile-long Basingstoke Canal was jointly acquired by Hampshire and **Surrey County Councils** in the 1970s to manage risks, protect the canal, and provide public recreation.

It is a site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and due to its hydrological biodiversity and effective management of its ecosystem, it is home to numerous nationally scarce species of flora and fauna.

The Basingstoke Canal Partnership was established to fund the canal operation following restoration in the late 1980s. The partnership includes a number of "riparian" partners like district, borough and town councils that contribute financially to the running of the canal.

In 1990, county councils for Hampshire and Surrey, as landowning authorities, created the Basingstoke Canal Authority. Under the arrangement, Hampshire employs the staff, provides IT and finance support to the authority, and Surrey manages the visitor centre at Mytchett.

However, according to the report, the current arrangement is not financially sustainable. In 2023/24, the cost of the canal required a draw of £192,000 on existing reserves to cover a shortfall in income.

The canal is funded by the landowning authorities and the riparian funding partners; however, some have indicated the reduction or withdrawal of their contributions, like Woking and Rushmoor Borough Council, which confirmed it was pulling all funding in 2023/24.

Due to the withdrawal of some funding, the two landowner authorities commissioned an external company to review management and recommend a sustainable operating model.

From the five alternatives, the chosen one indicated that the Basingstoke Canal Authority will continue to deliver statutory requirements and leisure navigation.

However, under this option, the authority will no longer deliver activities such as boat hire, camping, running the visitor centre, and events.

The proposal will be debated at the universal select committee (March 11), and the executive member for countryside and regulatory services, Cllr Russell Oppenheimer, will take a decision later that day.

Natalia Forero

Image credit: Basingstoke Canal Authority

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## Mixed reaction to Hunt's budget in Surrey



In a significant development outlined in today's Spring Budget, Surrey MP and Chancellor **Jeremy Hunt** confirmed the **Surrey County Deal** agreement, heralding a new era of devolution for Surrey County Council. This agreement, initially hinted at during last year's Autumn Statement, has been the focus of collaborative efforts between Surrey County Council officials and the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Outlined within this agreement are several key provisions aimed at empowering local governance within Surrey:

- Devolution of the Adult Education Budget and funding for Free Courses for Jobs.
- Integration of Local Enterprise Partnership functions.
- Transfer of new land assembly and compulsory purchase power to the Council.
- Strategic oversight for the delivery of future rounds of UKSPF.

Furthermore, the agreement signifies an intent for further devolution from central government to Surrey, allowing for the deepening of devolution arrangements over time, subject to Government agreement. Notably, this agreement does not mandate any structural reform of local government or unitarisation, preserving the sovereignty of the 12 Councils, including 11 District and Borough Councils alongside the County Council.

"Local government and our local communities are best placed to deliver what Surrey needs. I'm pleased that the government is recognising that, with hopefully further devolved powers to local government in due course," said **Tim Oliver**, (Conservative) Leader of Surrey County Council, expressing optimism regarding the devolution deal.

"This is a positive step to enable ambitious plans for Surrey's residents by devolving control to Local government and our local communities, that are best placed to deliver what Surrey needs. Working with our Partners we can maximise opportunities across a wide spectrum of residents' priorities," said Surrey County and Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative - Horton).

Dr. **Jonathan Carr-West**, Chief Executive of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), offered insights into the broader context of today's Budget announcements. "Our latest research found half of councils believe they could face bankruptcy within the next parliament. Council taxpayers are paying ever higher rates for fewer services...The Chancellor recognised market failures in children's residential care and SEND support but councils will not feel that this is enough to counteract the cost increases they have faced in those areas," Dr. Carr-West remarked, urging for a productive debate on potential solutions to the funding crisis.

**Paul Lavercombe**, tax partner at BDO in the South East, provided a business perspective on the Budget, noting the limited measures for businesses but highlighting certain provisions that may benefit taxpayers and stimulate investment, particularly in regional growth businesses. He said "The Chancellor was under pressure to deliver tax cuts and while this wasn't forthcoming for businesses with some hoping there would be a reduction to corporation tax signposted, taxpayers will welcome the national insurance cuts announced. Despite being pitched as a Budget for long-term growth, there was very little for business. The only obvious winner being the creative industries."

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## Woking's whopping bail out and tax rise



**Woking Borough Council** has raised its share of tax by 10 per cent. It comes as the bankrupt council was offered an "exceptional" £785 million Government bail out

The major bailout package aims to offset its debt and was signed off last night during a full council meeting. The offer was dependent on the council increasing its share of council tax by 10 per cent and comes on top of the previously agreed £8.4m in spending cuts.

Deputy leader of the council **Will Forster** said the total package of £785m was "the largest ever set of measures required for a council in intervention" He added: "Just let that sink in. Not the largest ever in Surrey, the largest ever in the country, not this year, ever."

Coupled with the rises announced by **Surrey County Council** and the police, B and D Council Tax homes will now pay £2,371.60 a year, up from £2,248.77. Had councillors failed to agree on the package, the local authority would "grind to a halt and be acting unlawfully" the meeting heard. Staff would go unpaid and services stop.

Leader of the council, Councillor **Ann-Marie Barker**, said a vote against the tax rise was to vote against the government's offer. She said: "A vote against the tax rise is to turn down the offer. I wanted a better offer but it's the offer we've got."

The council also announced that there would be £100,000 in hardship money to help ease some of the pain caused by the massive spending cuts, price hikes and tax rises.

Groups such as the bustler transport service, Citizens Advice Woking and the Lightbox have been forced to find new funding if they wish to continue. Some have approached the national lottery.

Woking Council has said the money would be for those most impacted by the added cost or loss of so many services. It includes £25k for a Council Tax hardship fund, £50k for Citizen Advice Woking and £25k for grants that replicate the Government's Household Support Fund.

Speaking after the meeting, Cllr Barker said: "Despite the council's complex financial situation, I am pleased that we have overcome this important hurdle and set a robust budget for the forthcoming financial year. I welcome the significant and unprecedented support package offered by Government which gives us flexibility to deal with money that should have been put aside for borrowing and allows us to capitalise our debt over the long-term.

"The conditions set out by Government align with work already being undertaken on asset rationalisation, debt reduction and improved commercial governance as part of our Improvement and recovery plan. I know residents will find any increase in council tax difficult which is why we are putting in place support for those

who find it hard to meet the cost of rising bills.

“These critical decisions are ones I did not want to make. However, they are necessary if we are to continue to provide essential services, set a balanced budget in future years and begin to return Woking to long-term financial sustainability. The future remains difficult and challenging. I am determined that Woking will recover to become a better council focused on delivering essential services to local people.”

## Surrey takes over enterprise partnerships

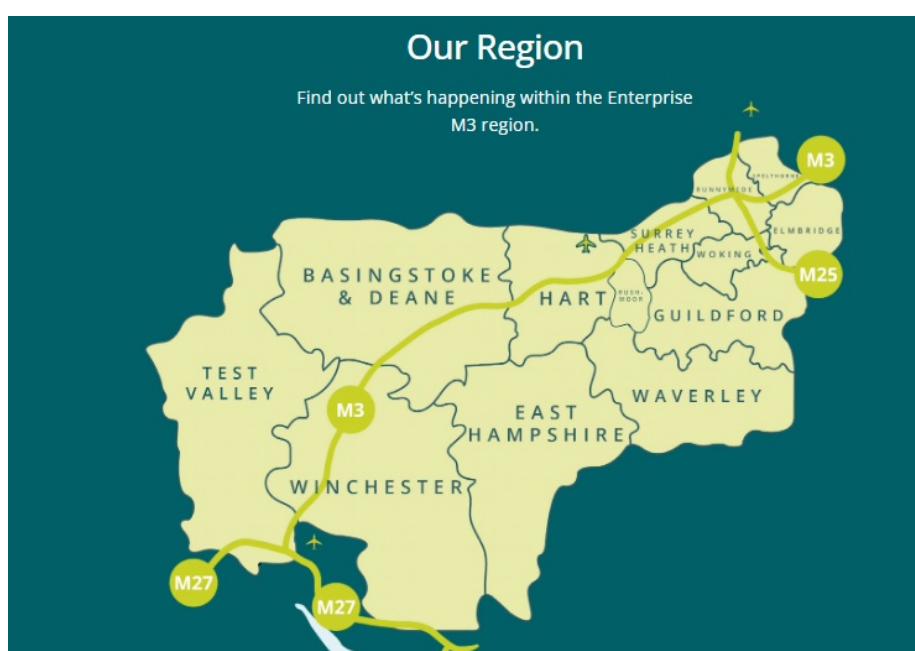
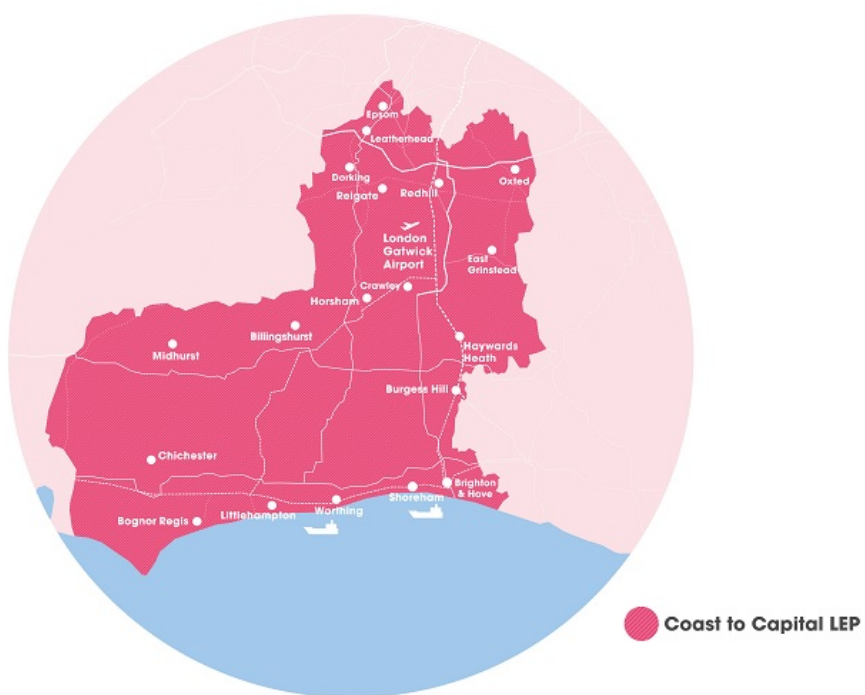


Businesses will be at the heart of Surrey’s economic growth as they are set to benefit from a single strategic vision and leadership for the Surrey economy as part of the transfer of formal powers to Surrey County Council.

From April, the Council will take up the key functions currently held by the county’s two Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Enterprise M3 and Coast to Capital.

The change will see the council lead on an enhanced oversight and delivery role in driving sustainable economic growth across the county. It will absorb formal responsibilities to deliver business support through the new Surrey-wide Growth Hub and deliver government funded programmes focused on skills.

The areas covered by Coast to Capital on the left and Enterprise M3 on the right:



**Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Transport, Infrastructure and Growth at Surrey County Council said:** “Surrey has a great economic story to tell. We’re the UK’s leading regional economy, with more than 100,000 businesses which generate more than £50 billion a year to the UK economy.

“We know there is huge potential to grow this further - through targeted support to key sectors, and through working with employers, training providers and local residents to create a high-quality skilled workforce for the future.

“I very much welcome the transfer of these powers into Surrey County Council.

“It will mean for the first time we will have one organisation who, together with a strong independent business voice, will provide a clear, coherent and comprehensive approach to developing a strong sustainable economy. This is positive for business and for residents.

“I want to thank the government for hearing our case and also to our partners in the LEPs for working with us to ensure there is a seamless transfer of service at the start of April.”

Surrey has historically been divided across two LEP boundaries - Enterprise M3 operating in the west of the county and Coast to Capital in the east - which has presented challenges in terms of strategic coherence and created confusion for local businesses.

In March 2023, the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Budget statement announced the intention to integrate LEP functions into upper tier local authorities.

Aware of the positive impacts that could have for Surrey, the County Council took steps to engage early with partners to ensure it was ready to absorb and deliver these functions from the point of transfer.

**A report discussed and agreed by the Council's Cabinet on 27th February** acknowledged the move could have a range of positive benefits for local businesses and residents including:

- Setting a single economic vision for the county, ensuring Surrey-wide solutions are developed to support local economic growth.
- The development of a new Surrey business brand and website to make it easier for businesses to know where to access the right information, advice and guidance.
- The creation of a Surrey Growth Hub service to provide universal signposting support for business, as well as targeted interventions to help eligible local businesses in their journey to becoming high-growth.
- The creation of a Surrey Careers Hub (launched in September 2023), which delivers a range of activities focused on ensuring schools and colleges can help young people take their next best step.
- Improved join-up and efficiencies with existing council services and teams.
- Greater democratic accountability for decision-making related to local economic growth, that will be informed by a strong, independent, and diverse private sector voice.
- Future government funding to support local growth will now be focused on the whole of Surrey, instead of it being spread across larger regional areas.

Further announcements will be made in the coming months regarding the launch of the new Surrey business brand, website, and Surrey Growth Hub.

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## Computer lets down County Council workers



Surrey County Council's new £30 million payroll system has left staff "wiping tears of frustration and helplessness" over missed payments, it is claimed.

It is claimed that the payroll system is paying employees the wrong wages, with reports that some are missing mortgage and rent payments, almost a year after it was introduced, unions have said. Workers on payroll and experiencing issues include teachers and firefighters.

The council brought in a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system last June and said it had "experienced some issues relating to payroll".

The council has said it was working continuously to improve the system but given its complexity, needed an ongoing programme of software upgrades and fixes to address issues that have arisen.

A permanent fix is not expected until early summer, Surrey County Council Trade Unions (SCCTU) has said.

The ERP was introduced last summer after the council was notified its previous payroll system, which was close to 20 years old, would no longer be supported with updates.

According to SCCTU, which is made up of 12 recognised bodies including Unison, NEU and Nasuwt: "All the trade unions in Surrey County Council have been helping distraught staff deal with pay errors month-on-month since June 2023.

"These errors include large overpayments and underpayments, which have had dire reverberations for the staff in question.

"This includes employees being unable to make payments on their mortgage, rent, cars, and utilities.

"For single parents, lower paid staff, and staff who have their wages topped up by Universal Credit, the fallout from these mistakes have had a catastrophic effect on the mental health of staff and their families."

They said in one extreme case a staff member confessed she and her children had to stay with her mother because they didn't have money to buy electricity or food.

The council said it does not have figures available for how many have been affected but say that the vast majority of cases have had minimal impact.

To make up the shortfall, the council has been making emergency payments with staff pleading the cases to their line managers, the union said.

Surrey UNISON estimates at least £100,000 has been paid in fees alone for emergency payments.

Overpayments can be equally problematic for low-paid staff who receive in-work benefits as they find themselves with too much money in their accounts and their top ups switched off - only to be out of pocket with the overpayment is clawed back, the unions said.

As such, the unions are now in dispute with the council over its implementation and said they have no confidence in this new payroll system.

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said: "Following the installation of a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system last summer, we have experienced some issues relating to payroll.

"We have put in place a number of workarounds and extra resource to try to minimise the impact on staff and schools, and a dedicated technical team is working to resolve underlying issues.

"The recovery plan is making good progress, with the number of errors reducing significantly over time including updating leavers' processes and the school financial reporting system, and a programme of engagement clinics has also been coordinated to provide individual schools/settings with focused support.

"We are still working through some of the issues and we are grateful to our staff and schools for both their efforts and patience as we continue to do this.

"Some level of disruption was expected throughout such a fundamental transition to a new system, but we are sorry for any inconvenience to employees and schools adversely affected; our primary focus has always been the welfare of our staff as we resolve any errors, and we will continue to work with them throughout this process."

Image: Mike Lawrence License details

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## More Surrey children in care to be cared for in Surrey





In a move to bolster support for children in care, **Surrey County Council** has announced the inauguration of three state-of-the-art children's homes, marking a significant stride in their commitment to enhancing residential capacity within the county. Situated in **Epsom** and Walton-on-Thames, these purpose-built facilities aim to provide a nurturing environment for Surrey children in need.

The council's investment of £34 million in improving sufficiency for children in care, coupled with £2.4 million allocated for workforce development, underscores their dedication to addressing the pressing needs of vulnerable children within the county. This comprehensive capital programme encompasses the creation of new facilities as well as the renovation and expansion of existing ones, resulting in the addition of over 30 individual bedrooms, thus affording more children the opportunity to remain within their communities.

Presently, approximately 70% of Surrey children in residential care are placed outside the county due to a scarcity of available homes. The council's strategic investment aims to reverse this trend by bolstering in-county provision. The newly inaugurated homes in Epsom and Walton-on-Thames, accommodating a total of ten children each, prioritize the placement of children currently residing outside the county, fostering a sense of belonging and stability.

The completion of these homes has been met with enthusiasm by **Clare Curran**, Cabinet Member for Children, Families, and Lifelong Learning, who expressed her delight at the prospect of offering more Surrey children a supportive home environment. Similarly, **Natalie Bramhall**, Cabinet Member for Property, Waste, and Infrastructure, commended the meticulous planning and design considerations that have gone into creating these homes, emphasizing their accessibility, homeliness, and integration with local amenities.

The construction of these homes has paved the way for new career opportunities in residential care, aligning with the council's commitment to workforce development. As the council moves closer to its sufficiency targets, with an additional home currently underway in Dorking, Surrey may emerge as a leading provider of children's home places nationwide by 2027.

Two Surrey children's homes have already receiving 'Good' and 'Outstanding' ratings from Ofsted this year. As Surrey County Council continues to expand its residential care capacity, the welfare of vulnerable children within the county is set to receive a substantial boost.

For more information, visit Surrey County Council's website and YouTube channel for insights into their Sufficiency Strategies and a video tour of one of the newly inaugurated children's homes, featuring commentary from key council members. Additionally, individuals interested in pursuing a career in residential care in Surrey are encouraged to explore current opportunities on the Surrey County Council job pages.

## Primary school blighted by drive-by fly-tipper



A "horrible, antisocial" pile of rubble was fly tipped outside a popular Surrey primary school by a lorry in a drive-by dump and run.

Neighbours heard a truck driving down Vine Road in East Molesey at about 11pm on Monday, February 26 but say they were unable to spot the culprit, a witness said. A video shows the swathes of rubble lining the residential street.

The huge mess was still there the following morning resulting in the road's closure during the busy school run drop-off. The nearby school, St Lawrence Church of England Primary, wrote to parents warning of the shut street and knock-on impact.

A witness said: "I heard it thunder down into the road, but it was such a fast drive by that when we went out it was gone. I think one of the parked cars was damaged. Several neighbours came out and we tried to secure the scene from accidents with cones and bins. The police came about an hour later and then the highways lorry came with official road closure signs."

On February 27, environmental officers from Elmbridge Borough Council had moved the waste to the side of the road and installed barriers to keep traffic away.

"The police said it was unusual for flytipping to be right in the middle of a residential road rather than in a corner or wasteland. It is a horrible antisocial crime. People who need waste removing really should check that they are using a licensed disposal contractor and not just go for the cheapest. I don't think people realise that they are responsible for their waste being disposed of legally and responsibly."

Another parent said: "How can you do this and feel ok about yourself?"

A spokesperson for Elmbridge Borough Council said its enforcement team is visiting the site and will be making enquiries in the neighbourhood. A call for witnesses will also be put out on its social media channels.

The said: "The fly-tip has been reported to our contractors for clearance and will be dealt with within 24 hours. We take fly-tipping incidents very seriously and will investigate every occurrence. If there is enough evidence, we will prosecute the person responsible.

"We will shortly launch an anti-litter campaign for this spring/summer and reiterate a strong message that littering and fly-tipping are not acceptable and will not be tolerated. We will be working with community groups towards a cleaner and greener Elmbridge so that everybody can take pride in the borough. We have a beautiful borough, and we will do all we can to make sure it is being protected."

A spokesperson for Surrey Police said: "We were called at around 11.30pm last night (26 February) to a report of a large amount of rubble strewn across Vine Road in East Molesey. We briefly attended to help clear the road and the incident was then passed over to National Highways."