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SES Water revives Surrey farm grants as leakage rises

7 November 2026



SES Water has reopened a grant fund to help Surrey farmers protect rivers and groundwater from agricultural pollution. The relaunch comes as Environment Agency figures show that leakage from the company's drinking water network rose by more than 10 per cent in 2025–26, although SES still lost less water per household than the England average.

The Catchment Fund is open to farmers and landowners in priority areas where changes in land management could help protect water at source. Fertilisers and pesticides can reach rivers in runoff or seep into groundwater. Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's infrastructure plan says around 85 per cent of the water supplied by SES comes from underground chalk and greensand sources.

What the grants have paid for

One grant paid for a bladed roller to loosen compacted soil, alongside soil tests and a subscription to an app to track changes. SES says loosening the soil can help roots grow deeper and rain soak in. Deeper roots could also help crops take up more nitrogen, leaving less nitrate to seep into groundwater.

The farmer told SES that roots were already growing into cracks made by the roller. There was a practical benefit too. Fence posts were easier to push into the ground. The company's announcement gave no measurements showing whether less nitrate had reached groundwater.

A second grant paid Surrey Wildlife Trust to assess a 2.2km stretch of the River Eden between two farms. The assessment identified possible measures including wider riverside buffer strips, tree planting, ponds and other wetland features. These could help intercept runoff and reduce bank erosion. The grant paid for the survey, and the assessment explored whether biodiversity net gain funding could pay for the restoration work. SES did not disclose the value of either grant or the budget for the reopened fund.

Less water lost than average, but leakage is rising

The Environment Agency says SES lost around 75 litres per property per day through leakage in 2025–26, against an England average of about 101 litres. Leakage accounted for 14.4 per cent of the water entering its distribution network, compared with 18.6 per cent nationally. Even with that better-than-average performance, the volume SES lost rose by more than 10 per cent in a year when leakage across England was broadly flat.

SES is part of Pennon Group, which reported £25.2 million of capital investment at SES in 2025–26. Pennon says that covered work on network resilience, leak detection and repairs, replacement of lead pipes and metering. Pennon also reported a group dividend of 29.29p per share for the year. That figure covers the whole group, which includes South West Water, and gives no breakdown of what shareholders received from SES's operations.

Who is responsible for sewage in Epsom and Ewell?

Thames Water is responsible for public sewerage in Epsom and Ewell, including the storm tanks that discharge into the Hogsmill system. The Environment Agency recorded 22 serious pollution incidents from Thames Water's sewerage assets across its operating area in 2025, including 11 from foul sewers. In a separate enforcement action, Ofwat imposed £122.7 million in penalties on Thames Water in May 2025, comprising £104.5 million for wastewater breaches and £18.2 million for breaches of dividend rules.

Across England, monitors recorded 291,492 storm overflow spills in 2025, down 35 per cent on 2024. The Environment Agency said unusually dry conditions accounted for much of the fall. Storm overflow counts record how often monitored outlets discharged. The agency separately records pollution incidents from sources such as foul sewers and treatment works.

Agricultural pollution is also a significant pressure. An Environment Agency report published this year cites national data identifying agriculture as adversely affecting 40 per cent of England's water bodies. A parliamentary inquiry cited sewage and wastewater as a pressure affecting 36 per cent, based on the same generation of river basin evidence. The categories can overlap, and the balance varies from river to river.

For the River Eden, the next question is which of the proposed works will be funded and carried out. For the farm trial, it is whether the soil tests show a lasting improvement and whether monitoring can establish that less nitrate is reaching

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groundwater.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Surrey’s ancient woods among England’s richest – at risk?

7 November 2026



New BBC analysis shows Surrey is home to some of the densest concentrations of ancient woodland in England, as conservation groups warn that the drive to build 1.5 million homes and the new “grey belt” could weaken protection for habitats that have stood since at least 1600.

Surrey is one of the most important counties in England for ancient woodland, according to new figures from the BBC Shared Data Unit – and campaigners fear the national push for housing could put some of those woods under growing pressure.

Ancient woodland is land that has been continuously wooded since at least 1600. It covers only around 2.5% of England, yet it is regarded as one of the country’s most valuable wildlife habitats. Because these ecosystems take centuries to develop, conservation groups describe them as irreplaceable.

The BBC’s analysis of Natural England mapping shows that across England as a whole, ancient woodland covers 2.6% of council areas.

In Surrey, the picture varies sharply from borough to borough. Mole Valley, which borders Epsom & Ewell to the south, is among the most heavily wooded districts in the country, with ancient woodland covering 12.7% of its area – placing it eighth of roughly 290 council areas in the data. Waverley (11.4%) ranks tenth. Tandridge (7.1%) and Guildford (6.8%) are also well above the national figure.

By contrast, Epsom & Ewell has about 34 hectares of ancient woodland – roughly 340,000 square metres, or the equivalent of around 47 football pitches – covering 1.0% of the borough. That is below the national average, reflecting the borough’s small size and largely built-up character. Much of what survives lies within the borough’s countryside: the council describes much of the woodland at Horton Country Park as ancient coppice woodland, including Butcher’s Grove, where coppicing dates back to medieval times.

Taken together, Surrey’s eleven districts and boroughs contain around 12,150 hectares of ancient woodland – about 47 square miles.

“Wholly exceptional”

Under national planning policy, development that would cause the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland should be refused unless there are “wholly exceptional reasons” and a suitable compensation strategy exists. Natural England advises councils to keep a buffer of at least 15 metres between new development and ancient woodland.

But the BBC Shared Data Unit found dozens of housing schemes across England proposed or approved on land immediately beside ancient woods – including around 450 homes close to Hook Wood in Kent, 150 bordering Chaddesden Wood in Derby and about 130 beside Gelster Wood near Doncaster.

Campaigners say much of the controversy is not about felling trees but about building right up to the woodland edge. Ecologists warn that construction can damage root systems, change drainage, increase pollution and bring noise and light – while new residents’ pets can threaten ground-nesting birds and bats.

They also point to the government’s target of 1.5 million new homes by the end of 2029 and the creation of the “grey belt” – poorer-quality parts of the Green Belt that can be built on – as raising the pressure, particularly in the South East.

Lucy Graebe-Watson, chairwoman of Ancient Woodland UK, said: “We are already seeing cases where existing protections are struggling.” She said her organisation had seen a rise in concerns and alerts from local groups since recent planning reforms, especially around land allocations and buffer zones, and warned that because protection is based on policy

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rather than law, any increase in pressure raises the risk. Ancient Woodland UK wants statutory legal protection for ancient woodland.

Carl Bunnage, head of nature policy at the RSPB, described the “wholly exceptional” provision as a potential loophole for developers. He said that while the RSPB welcomed improvements to the definition of irreplaceable habitats in the new National Planning Policy Framework, protection should be strengthened – including a definitive list of irreplaceable habitats given the strongest safeguards, as historic buildings are. He added that housing and growth policies are generally given “substantial” weight in planning decisions while nature policies are not, meaning efforts to protect nature often start as an uphill battle.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said ancient woodlands have “very clear and strong protections” and that proposals resulting in their loss or deterioration should be refused, with very limited exceptions such as nationally significant infrastructure – where measures to compensate for the impact would be required.

Local Plan

The figures come as Epsom & Ewell’s own Local Plan remains under examination. The plan was submitted to the government in March 2025, and earlier this year, at the inspector’s request, the council consulted on additional sites that could be allocated for housing through main modifications.

Surrey’s ancient woodland at a glance (share of each council area)

Mole Valley – 12.7% (about 3,287 hectares)
Waverley – 11.4% (3,942 ha)
Tandridge – 7.1% (1,770 ha)
Guildford – 6.8% (1,836 ha)
Reigate and Banstead – 4.5% (578 ha)
Runnymede – 4.0% (312 ha)
Elmbridge – 2.8% (268 ha)
Epsom and Ewell – 1.0% (34 ha)
Surrey Heath – 0.8% (76 ha)
Woking – 0.8% (51 ha)
Spelthorne – less than 0.1% (2 ha)
England average – 2.6%

How the figures were calculated: the BBC Shared Data Unit combined Natural England’s mapping of ancient woodland with Office for National Statistics council boundaries, and divided the area of ancient woodland in each council by that council’s total area. Hectare figures, the Surrey total and rankings have been calculated by Epsom and Ewell Times from the BBC data.

This story was produced with data from the BBC Shared Data Unit, part of the BBC Local News Partnerships.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Image: Butchers Grove Horton Country Park Epsom aerial from google maps

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Surrey to support nature activity for health

7 November 2026



A new countywide programme has been launched to help more Surrey residents improve their health and wellbeing through spending time in nature.

Surrey County Council has launched the Surrey Green Health and Wellbeing Programme in partnership with the Community Foundation for Surrey. Backed by a £170,000 investment, the programme will support voluntary, community

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and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations that provide nature-based activities and services across the county.

The programme which forms part of SCC's work to improve health and wellbeing, strengthen communities and help prevent poor health was officially launched on Wednesday 7 October at an event bringing together organisations from across Surrey to share ideas, make new connections and find out more about the support available through the programme.

Across Surrey, organisations already deliver activities such as community gardening, conservation volunteering, walking groups and outdoor wellbeing sessions. The new programme will help these organisations grow, work together and reach more people. More information on existing services is available on the Healthy Surrey website.

Mark Nuti, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Health and Communities, said: "We know that spending time in nature can have a positive impact on both physical and mental wellbeing. Across Surrey, local organisations are already doing fantastic work to help people connect with nature and improve their health."

"This new programme will help strengthen those organisations, encourage greater collaboration and ensure more residents can access the benefits that Green Health can provide. By investing in community-led solutions, we're helping to create healthier communities and a stronger, more connected Green Health network across Surrey."

The Community Foundation for Surrey will manage the new Green Health and Wellbeing Grant Fund, providing financial support to eligible VCSE organisations. The programme will also create a Surrey-wide Community of Practice, bringing organisations together through workshops, networking and shared learning opportunities.

Beccy Bowden, Chief Executive of Community Foundation for Surrey, said: "We are delighted to launch this new fund in partnership with Surrey County Council, helping more people across Surrey benefit from the positive impact nature can have on health and wellbeing. Together, we want to support local organisations to extend this important work, helping more residents connect with nature and access the benefits of green and blue spaces."

"By working alongside Surrey County Council and community partners, we can help improve health and wellbeing while strengthening people's connection with the natural environment around them."

The programme includes:

- A dedicated Green Health and Wellbeing Grant Fund for eligible VCSE organisations
- A Surrey-wide Community of Practice for organisations working in green health
- Workshops, networking events and opportunities to share learning
- Collaboration with partners to help shape the future of green health in Surrey

Information about grant funding opportunities and how organisations can get involved will be shared through Surrey County Council and Community Foundation for Surrey channels.

Surrey County Council

Tree planting in Surrey overshoots

7 November 2026



More than 800,000 new trees have been planted across Surrey over the past five years – overshooting the council's own target, according to a report.

Surrey County Council's climate change progress report analysed the authority's progress for the first five years of its climate change delivery programme between 2021 and 2026.

The findings note that 116,359 trees have been planted in the 2025/26 financial year alone, bringing the total planted over the past half decade 885,000.

It means the council has exceeded its initial target of 600,000 in the first phase of the programme. Surrey has committed to planting 1.2 million trees by 2030, representing one for every resident.

Tree planting was one of 74 action points reviewed in the report, which is due to be considered by councillors next week.

A total of 45 of these actions were delivered, according to the summary, with 18 partially completed and 11 either seeing

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limited progress or not delivered at all.

But the council claims it is “broadly on track” to meet its 2030 net zero targets, with the report saying that the authority’s carbon emissions have been reduced by around 60 percent.

“Maintaining progress towards the net zero will require continued investment, clear prioritisation and a focus on the most carbon-intensive assets, alongside planning around offsetting remaining emissions in 2030,” the report says.

It adds: “A major success of the programme has been supporting residents to reduce energy bills and improve their homes.

“More than 1,438 low-income households received energy efficiency improvements, including insulation, solar and low-carbon heating measures, supported by over 3,000 HEAT home visits providing advice and access to funding.”

However, it also noted the challenges ahead in continuing to pursue decarbonisation policies, saying the programme was “significantly affected by external market conditions, supply chain constraints and wider economic pressures”.

Elmbridge Borough Council recently passed a motion calling for the future East Surrey council to update its tree strategy to consider the survival rate of trees, not just how many are planted.

The text said that many trees planted in the borough are dying within the year as a result of not receiving the right aftercare.

In that meeting, Councillor Katerina Lusk (Conservative: Cobham and Downside) told councillors: “There is little point celebrating the number of trees we plant if a significant number of them are dead a year later.”

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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Trees Surrey (Credit: Google Maps)

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Surrey Hills National Landscape to expand?

7 November 2026



East Surrey’s MP has called on the government to approve the expansion of the county’s protected landscapes “as soon as possible”.

Claire Coutinho has written to Environment Secretary Dame Angela Eagle to voice her support for the recent review of the Surrey Hills National Landscapes’ boundaries.

Formerly known as the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the proposed expansion would see 129 square kilometres of stunning landscape brought under its umbrella.

Ms Coutinho wrote: “We are so lucky in East Surrey to be surrounded by such beautiful countryside – rolling hills, grazing fields, historic woodland.

“I am proud to have helped to secure this long overdue boundary review over six years ago, and it is wonderful to see it has reached this major milestone.

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“Countless individuals and groups have poured thousands of hours into this project to get it to where it is today.

“Particular thanks must go to the team at Surrey Hills National Landscape, Tandridge District Council, our local farmers and landowners, and the many other organisations that have been intimately involved in this process from the very beginning.”

National Landscapes give designated stretches of countryside additional protections against development under planning laws.

While they receive similar safeguards, they differ from National Parks, which are overseen by separate National Park Authorities.

The new boundaries will see Surrey Hills stretch all the way from Hampshire to parts of Greater London, increasing its size by almost a third.

Areas poised to be brought into the National Landscape include Godstone Hills, Chipstead Valleys and Caterham Woods.

“Protecting our natural environment means cherishing the inheritance entrusted to the current generation by our forebears for the benefit of the next,” Ms Coutinho added in her letter.

“This Burkean contract between the living and those yet to be born, through which the protection of our natural landscapes can be preserved, is a core principle many of my constituents hold dear and one that should never be abandoned.

“I therefore hope that, as the Secretary of State responsible, you will consider the proposal with a view to approving it as soon as possible.”

Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs spokesperson said: “We know Surrey Hills is loved by its local community and volunteers for its natural beauty, and it is great that so many people care about its future.

“We have received an application from Natural England to extend the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and, as with all applications, will be considering it in due course.”

Surrey Hills Board chair Kathy Atkinson previously said she would be writing to Dame Angela to invite her to visit the National Landscape.

She said: “The proposed extension represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to recognise and protect more of the special landscapes that define Surrey Hills and the surrounding area.”

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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Box Hill (Credit: Google Maps)

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Water shortage risk drives Surrey farm plan for irrigation pond

7 November 2026



An east Surrey farm is seeking permission to build a new irrigation pond, as climate change has made water supply a “major operational risk”.

Reid Manor Farm Limited has put forward a prior notification application to Tandridge District Council for excavation works to install the pond in a field to the west of Lingfield.

The applicant noted that “mixed farming activities” are currently undertaken in the area, with hay production being the largest operation.

“There are a number of other farming activities the business is currently exploring and in the process of setting up to support the farming business,” the planning documents say.

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Blackberry harvesting and jam making are expected to be included among these activities, the applicant states.

But they added that the proposals for a new irrigation pond represent a “critical business asset” in the cultivation of aquatic plants.

“While south east England is historically the driest part of the UK, climate change has worsened summer droughts and unpredictable rainfall patterns, making reliable water access a major operational risk,” the documents say.

They add: “A farm irrigation pond allows a farm to capture and store abundant winter rainfall, securing an independent, year-round water supply that protects the crop from summer water restrictions and heat stress.”

The applicant also pointed to a government statement published in its ‘Farming Roadmap 2050’, which states: “The scientific consensus is clear that the UK should expect wilder, stormier weather with significantly increased flooding as well as summer droughts.

“With 70 per cent of our land currently used for agricultural purposes, it will become increasingly important to hold more water on farmlands to help reduce the impact of flooding downriver and support farmers during drought periods.”

Access to the farm via Brickhouse Lane would not be changed as a result of this development, the documents claim.

They add: “The site currently has no mains water connection, and no water bore holes exist on site meaning the only current water source option is harvesting rainwater.”

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

Image: Wheat stock image (Credit: Pixabay)

Water voles thriving in Ewell’s Hogsmill

7 November 2026



Camera footage and fresh field signs suggest water voles are settling in and spreading along the Surrey chalk stream

Water voles are showing encouraging signs of recovery along the Hogsmill River, one year after 50 of the threatened mammals were released into the river and surrounding wetlands in Ewell, Surrey.

Camera traps have captured a continuous flow of images showing the water voles displaying natural behaviours, while recent surveys have found evidence of their presence both upstream and downstream of the original release site.

The field signs include burrows in the riverbanks, feeding remains, vegetation chewed at a characteristic 45-degree angle and distinctive “tic-tac-shaped” droppings found at water vole latrines. The findings suggest the animals are exploring the river and establishing themselves within their restored habitat.

Water voles were released into Chamber Mead wetlands and the adjacent Upper Hogsmill River on 30 July 2025 by the South East Rivers Trust and conservation charity Citizen Zoo.

The release marked the return of water voles to Surrey following an absence of more than 20 years and complemented an earlier reintroduction further downstream on the Hogsmill.

Laura Nee, Catchment Officer at the South East Rivers Trust, said: “It’s wonderful to see how excited local people are to have water voles living on their doorstep. Residents often stop to tell me about hearing the tell-tale ‘plop’ of something entering the water and wondering whether a vole is nearby.

“Although water voles can be difficult to spot, our monitoring with Citizen Zoo is giving us an encouraging picture of how they are settling in. Camera traps have captured a continuous flow of images showing the voles displaying natural behaviours, while recent surveys have found signs of their presence both upstream and downstream, including latrines, feeding remains and burrows in the riverbanks.

“A year after the reintroduction, it’s incredibly exciting to see evidence that the water voles are thriving and making the Hogsmill their home.”

Citizen Zoo is monitoring the population using four latrine rafts, two camera traps and a clay tracking raft positioned along this stretch of the catchment.

The equipment, combined with regular field surveys, helps conservationists understand where the water voles are living, how they are moving along the river and whether the population is successfully establishing.

Water voles were once widespread along the Hogsmill but disappeared from Surrey following decades of habitat loss and pressure from invasive American mink.

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Their return was made possible by long-term work to restore the river and create suitable habitat, including the development of Chamber Mead wetlands by the South East Rivers Trust and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

The wetlands provide the dense vegetation, connected river habitat and suitable banks that water voles need for food, shelter and burrowing.

The July 2025 release formed part of the WET Hogsmill project, delivered by the South East Rivers Trust in partnership with Citizen Zoo and supported through Natural England's Species Recovery Programme.

The water voles were bred by Wildwood Trust, which specialises in conservation breeding and the recovery of native species.

The release also helped strengthen the population established further downstream, where Citizen Zoo released 101 water voles in 2022. Creating connected populations along the river can improve genetic diversity and support the species' longer-term recovery.

Ongoing monitoring will help the South East Rivers Trust and Citizen Zoo track the population's progress and guide future habitat conservation along the Hogsmill.

The Hogsmill is a rare chalk stream flowing through Epsom and Ewell and the Royal Borough of Kingston before joining the River Thames. Chalk streams are internationally important habitats, supported by clear, mineral-rich groundwater and characterised by distinctive plants and wildlife.

The WET Hogsmill project ran from September 2023 to 2025 and created or improved habitat for water voles, European eels and native trout. It was led by the South East Rivers Trust in partnership with Citizen Zoo and supported through Natural England's Species Recovery Programme.

The water vole reintroduction was also supported by Wildwood Trust, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and Thames Water.

Citizen Zoo is a social enterprise and conservation charity working to restore nature and reconnect people with the natural world through community-led rewilding and species recovery.

South East Rivers Trust

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Discovering Epsom's Secret Lavender Garden

7 November 2026



A family-run lavender business has celebrated 20 years after growing from a simple stall and tent into one of the area's best-known attractions.

Mayfield Lavender marked the milestone at its Epsom site, where its founder, Lorna Maye, reflected on two decades of family life, hard work, community connections and the challenges of building a business from the ground up.

"My goodness knows how we've got to 20 years and are still standing upright," she joked. "It's been lots of fun. It's been extremely hard work."

Her daughters were just four and six when the family started Mayfield Lavender and have grown up alongside the business. In the early days, they would play with Polly Pocket and Playmobil in the back of the family camper van while their parents worked at the lavender fields. "We used to bribe them to come up to the lavender fields," she recalled.

She said she now wishes the family had filmed those early years after watching Clarkson's Farm. "It has been a huge learning curve," she said. "We've come a long way."

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But after two decades, one of the things she is proudest of is that the business remains a family affair. “What’s really important to me is working with my girls,” she said. “I think hard work pays off in lots of different ways.”

She admitted that running the business has often meant long hours and that achieving a good work-life balance has not always been easy. “Sometimes people chastise you for working all the time and say, ‘Why do you work so hard? You should be doing other things. But actually, I really enjoy a lot of it. I’ve been doing it for 20 years and I kind of feel like I don’t know anything else.”

From lavender fields to an Epsom café

The family bought its Epsom site in 2011, when it was considerably more dilapidated than it is today. The site had previously been used for growing crops, before the family planted lavender and began transforming the land. Their next major step came in November 2022 when they opened a full café, a venture which quickly became much busier than expected.

Despite its popularity, she told fellow local business owners that hospitality can be a difficult industry in which to make money. She added that while the café is regularly full, the challenge is now working out how to turn that popularity into a sustainable business.

“We tick a lot of the boxes. We’re doing something right, but we just have to work out how we can maximise our opportunity.”

She also praised the staff, friends and family who have helped Mayfield Lavender grow over the years, describing the business as very much a team effort.

The work continues for much of the year. Preparations for the summer lavender season begin around March, before the fields open to visitors. By September, harvesting and closing the fields is under way, before the family turns its attention to Christmas trees and preparations begin once again for the following summer.

A place with meaning

Beyond the business itself, one of the most rewarding parts of Mayfield Lavender has been discovering what the fields mean to the people who visit them. Some customers have returned year after year for two decades.

The fields have also become a place of comfort for some people undergoing treatment at the nearby Royal Marsden. “We’re lucky enough to have the Royal Marsden on our doorstep,” she said. Over the years, memorial benches have been placed at the fields, while patients and their families have visited during and after treatment.

“Sometimes you forget that it actually means a lot to people,” she said. “The lavender makes them feel relaxed. It’s a good thing to have provided something that is a nice environment for people.”

For the founder herself, one of the rewards of all those years of work comes from seeing the fields at the start of the day. “There’s nothing better than going up first thing in the morning and seeing the blue sky over the purple fields,” she said.

‘Resourcefulness is greater than strength’

After 20 years in business, there is one phrase the family regularly returns to: “Resourcefulness is greater than strength.”

She described it as something of a company motto. “There’s always something that challenges you,” she said. “I think the biggest challenge actually is thinking more cleverly rather than the doing. Like many independent businesses, Mayfield is dealing with rising costs, including business rates, taxes and wages.

“Business is challenging for everybody,” she said. “We just have to figure it out. It’s part of the challenge of business.”

The anniversary event also gave the family a rare opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with other local businesses. Although Mayfield Lavender welcomes large numbers of visitors and has strong ties with the community, its founder said running a business can sometimes be surprisingly isolating.

Discovering Epsom’s Secret Lavender Garden

While many people know Mayfield Lavender’s Banstead fields, the family is also keen for more residents to discover its Secret Lavender Garden in Epsom. Unlike the Banstead fields, which can be seen from the road, the Epsom garden is tucked away, which inspired its name.

She added: “What I want is for people to have the confidence to come and discover new things and to support local business.”

Renewal, regrowth and regeneration

Looking to the future also means looking after the lavender itself. Mayfield has begun a major regeneration programme as some of its original lavender plants approach 20 years old. As lavender plants age, they can become more straggly and produce less oil, both in terms of quantity and quality, meaning areas of the fields eventually need to be replanted.

The programme, which began last year, centres on three words: renewal, regrowth and regeneration.

“You can’t come to a lavender field and expect it to look picture-postcard every year because it’s a natural plant,” she said. “The weather plays its part, tourism plays its part, and sometimes the plant ages and it needs to be replaced.”

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When some of the older plants were removed, visitors were shown how to take lavender cuttings and were encouraged to take them home and grow them in their own gardens.

The idea was that a small part of Mayfield Lavender could continue growing elsewhere while the main fields themselves were regenerated. The business also grows young plants in its Epsom glasshouse ready for replanting.

The founder hopes the project will encourage more people to grow lavender at home, particularly during increasingly hot and dry weather. Once established in a sunny position and well-drained soil, lavender requires relatively little water and can be a valuable drought-tolerant addition to a garden.

It also provides an important food source for bees and other pollinators. For Mayfield Lavender, the regeneration programme is therefore about much more than keeping the fields looking beautiful.

“You have to keep providing, not just for people to enjoy the field, but for all the wildlife and other plant life that grows around it to carry on.”

Twenty years after the family began with a stall, a tent and two young children in tow, Mayfield Lavender is continuing to evolve, while holding on to the family, community and landscape at the heart of the business.

Visit and get involved

Local residents are invited to discover Mayfield Lavender’s Secret Lavender Garden in Epsom, visit the café and explore the lavender for themselves. The family is also keen to hear from local businesses, community groups and organisations interested in collaborating or developing new ideas at the site. As its founder put it: “If there’s something that you think, ‘I could be doing something really cool here,’ just let us know.”

Where to find us?

Caffee: Mayfield Lavender Glasshouse Cafe and Gift & Plant Shop, 139 Reigate Rd, Epsom KT17 3DW

Mayfield Lavender Farm, 1 Carshalton Rd, Banstead SM7 3JA

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New Gatwick wetland aims to reduce flood and drought risks

7 November 2026



A new wetland capable of holding up to 600,000 litres of water has been created near Gatwick as part of efforts to make the Upper Mole catchment more resilient to flooding, heatwaves and prolonged dry weather.

The South East Rivers Trust has completed the latest phase of a project using natural measures to slow, store and filter water before it travels downstream.

Across two sites, the environmental charity has created the wetland and reconnected 100 metres of river with its natural floodplain.

The wetland will collect rainfall and surface water, releasing it gradually downstream. Restoring the connection between the river and its floodplain will also give water more space to spread out and be held temporarily during periods of heavy rain.

The measures are intended to ease pressure on downstream communities when rainfall is intense, while keeping more water in the landscape during hot and dry periods. The restored areas should also provide new and improved habitats for wildlife.

The work was funded by London Gatwick through its Decade of Change sustainability programme, a strategy covering 10 environmental and social priorities up to 2030.

The latest phase, delivered between July 2025 and June 2026, included:

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- Installing more than 50 “leaky barriers” to slow the movement of water;
- Planting a 100-metre hedgerow containing 400 native trees;
- Bringing two more landowners into the catchment project; and
- Monitoring rainfall, river levels and water clarity to study how water moves through the landscape.

Leaky barriers are carefully positioned structures made from natural materials such as branches and logs. Under normal conditions, water can continue to flow through them, but during heavier rainfall they slow the flow and hold back some of the water temporarily.

George Biggs, project officer at the South East Rivers Trust, said the recent spell of hot and dry weather illustrated one side of the challenge facing the area.

“During the current hot and dry weather, it can be difficult to imagine how quickly heavy rainfall can create problems for our rivers and local communities,” he said.

“The Upper Mole responds very rapidly when it rains, with water moving quickly through the catchment. By restoring wetlands, reconnecting rivers with their floodplains and installing leaky barriers, we can give that water more space and more time.

“These measures help create a healthier, more resilient landscape that is better prepared for both very wet and very dry conditions. They also provide valuable new habitats for wildlife.”

The Upper Mole is particularly responsive to rainfall because of its clay soils, modified river channels and surrounding urban development. Heavy rain can move rapidly downstream, increasing the risk of flooding and placing additional pressure on water quality and river habitats.

Natural flood management seeks to tackle those problems nearer their source by working with the landscape to slow, store and filter water.

Mark Edwards, head of sustainability at London Gatwick, said: “This important initiative, delivered in partnership with the South East Rivers Trust, is a vital part of London Gatwick’s Decade of Change sustainability programme.

“This partnership is a great example of bringing together technical expertise, landowners and local knowledge to deliver practical measures that support biodiversity, water quality and climate resilience.

“It demonstrates how London Gatwick can support enhancements to the local area outside the airport.”

Further restoration work is now being planned across the Upper Mole catchment. Proposals include restoring an old pond so that it can store more water and support biodiversity, installing additional leaky barriers and designing another wetland to improve water quality and availability.

The partners also intend to extend the project into another of the Upper Mole’s six waterbodies, continue monitoring the measures already installed and hold community engagement days about the river and natural flood management.

The project initially concentrated on the headwaters of the River Mole, including Baldhorns Brook near Rusper. Its longer-term ambition is to expand throughout the Upper Mole catchment and demonstrate how nature-based measures could help restore other urban river headwaters across the South East.

Monitoring equipment is recording rainfall, river levels and turbidity – a measurement related to water clarity – so that the Trust can assess how the catchment and the completed interventions respond to wet weather.

Further information about the Gatwick Airport Natural Flood Management Project is available from the South East Rivers Trust.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Photo: Weed clearing – courtesy South-East Rivers Trust

Epsom Playhouse to embrace heat pumps and trees to be felled – a planning committee’s night’s work

7 November 2026

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Last night Councillors unanimously approved the council's own application to replace ageing air-conditioning plant at Epsom Playhouse with a modern heat pump system, in a decision expected to cut the theatre's reliance on fossil fuels.

The scheme, brought to committee because the council itself is the applicant, will see five redundant roof-mounted air conditioning condensers and a gas-fired boiler removed from the roof of the Ashley Avenue theatre and replaced with six air source heat pumps and four condenser units. The new equipment will sit within a 1.8-metre acoustic screen to control noise.

Presenting the report, a planning officer told the committee the works would modernise the Playhouse's building services and "contribute towards the council's net-zero objectives, and reduce the building's reliance on fossil fuels." Because the theatre adjoins the Grade II listed 47-51 South Street and sits next to the Epsom Town Conservation Area, officers had assessed the impact on the setting of those heritage assets, concluding it would cause "less than substantial harm" — but that this harm was outweighed by the public benefit of the energy efficiency improvements.

The council's Environmental Health Officer raised no objection, subject to a condition requiring a report confirming noise from the new plant does not exceed 37 dB — measured at the nearest habitable window, at neighbouring properties including 39 South Street.

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) asked officers whether any images were available of how visible the new acoustic screening would be from street level. The officer explained that although the fencing would stand 1.8 metres high in total, most of it would sit behind the existing roof parapet, meaning only around 1.3 metres would be visible — and only from the Ashley Avenue side of the building, a route she described as "a public thoroughfare, but not well used."

As a verbal update, members were told Surrey County Council's Highway Authority had raised no objection, and the scheme had received support from the Theatres Trust.

Following the questions, the application was approved unanimously subject to the conditions and informatives set out in the officers' report — including a requirement that the equipment be removed within a month of any future cessation of use, to protect the setting of the neighbouring listed building.

Drummond Gardens: committee refuses to fell veteran oak and three poplars, approves loss of six other protected trees

The most contentious item of the evening concerned an application to fell ten trees protected by Tree Preservation Orders at Drummond Gardens, a 1930s apartment block off Christ Church Mount, after the block's managing agents argued the trees were causing subsidence damage to the building.

The application sought consent to fell four English oaks within the private grounds of Drummond Gardens, and six Lombardy poplars in the adjoining, council-owned Long Grove Park. Following a lengthy and detailed presentation from the council's Tree Officer, members voted to approve felling of six of the ten trees, refuse felling of the remaining four, and instead require substantial crown reduction pruning of those four as a compromise measure.

A long-running subsidence dispute

The officer explained that Drummond Gardens has "a long history of building movement," with cracking on the building's west-facing wall having worsened in recent years, most severely around flats 26 to 31. A potential insurance claim was first notified to the council in 2020, but was deferred at the time because the trees involved were protected and there was insufficient evidence — including missing structural engineering and level-monitoring data — to justify their removal. That evidence has since been gathered, including a structural engineer's report, drainage surveys, and building level monitoring carried out between 2021 and 2024.

He told members the building's foundations are shallow — between 45 and 68 centimetres deep in most places, save for a section towards the south-west corner that was partially underpinned to a depth of two to three metres in 1995. He explained that foundations of this shallow depth are "inadequate by modern standards" on clay soil, particularly where trees are nearby, though he noted that "many properties with shallow foundations on clay coexist with trees without suffering subsidence."

Root samples recovered during site investigations were not starch-tested, meaning there is no scientific confirmation of whether they were alive at the time they were dug up — a gap in the evidence that came up more than once during member questions.

Tree-by-tree recommendations

The assessment, illustrated with photographs of each tree, distinguished between:

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- **Oaks T5 and T6** — two middle-aged oaks close to the point of greatest recorded building movement. Mr Young said these were "clearly implicated in causing subsidence damage," noting that even after a neighbouring oak was removed in 2020, level monitoring still showed a seasonal pattern of movement associated with these two trees. Because they are still young enough to grow significantly larger, he judged the future risk to be high and recommended felling.
- **Oak T12** — a small, suppressed specimen tucked behind the veteran oak, recommended for felling as being of low amenity value.
- **Oak T9** — a "transitionary veteran" oak estimated to be around 160 years old, likely a survivor of the field-boundary hedgerow that predates Drummond Gardens itself. Mr Young recommended this tree be retained, explaining that because the tree pre-dates the building, its long-term extraction of moisture from the clay soil may already have caused the ground — and the building above it — to settle to a lower level than it would otherwise sit at. Felling the tree now, he warned, risks the reverse effect: the ground swelling back upwards ("heave") as the soil rehydrates, potentially causing fresh damage. He noted the tree shows signs of naturally "retrenching" — dying back at the crown and roots as it ages — which may explain readings showing the building had actually risen slightly over the past winter. His recommendation was crown reduction rather than felling.
- **Lombardy poplars T22, T23 and T24** — recommended for felling. These are the three poplars closest to the corner of the building where subsidence has been recorded, and Mr Young noted they also have decay at old "topping" points from previous pruning, reducing their safe life expectancy and increasing the risk of branch failure onto the more open part of the garden nearby.
- **Poplars T20, T21 and T25** — recommended for retention with substantial crown reduction (cutting back the canopy by around a third), rather than felling. Mr Young said building movement at this end of the site was slight, "within building tolerance," and that there was no clear evidence any single poplar was responsible for seasonal movement.

Member questions

Before discussion began, Chair Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) noted for the record that he — and, he believed, other members — had been contacted directly by the Drummond Gardens Property Group, but stressed the committee was approaching the item "with an open mind."

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) asked whether the council would be financially liable if the committee's decision were followed but further damage subsequently occurred. Head of Development Management and Planning Enforcement, confirmed that in principle it could be, "but they would need to do additional work to prove that." Cllr Dallen also queried how much weight the committee should give to the council's financial exposure in reaching what would normally be a purely planning judgement. The officer confirmed this was a legitimate material consideration in this case, given "the financial risk to the council… could be significant, depending on the extent of works that are required to the building."

Cllr **James Lawrence** (Independent College) questioned the internal consistency of the recommendation, noting that Oak T9 sat close to boreholes where oak roots had been recovered — comparable evidence, he suggested, to that used to justify felling T5 and T6 — and that T9 did not show the hollowing typically associated with veteran trees. He also queried whether the level of crown reduction proposed for the poplars was proportionate, given it would need to be repeated regularly and would itself reduce the trees' amenity value. Mr Young responded that the key distinction was vigour: T5 and T6 remain in active growth and have significant capacity to expand their root systems further, whereas T9, as an ageing tree past its physiological peak, was more likely to be naturally reducing its water demand rather than increasing it. He added that without DNA root testing, it was not possible to say definitively which poplars' roots lay beneath the building, and that felling all six risked being "quite a scorched earth approach."

Cllr Alison Kelly asked what risk of heave would arise if the committee took a "wholesale" approach and approved felling of all ten trees, and whether that would carry legal liability. The tree officer explained the heave risk applied specifically to the veteran oak, T9, because of its age relative to the building, but not materially to the younger oaks or the poplars, which post-date or are roughly contemporary with the building's construction and would not have caused the ground to subside below its original level.

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) praised the report as "an excellent, well-written report, well-researched, well-argued, factually based," noting that his initial assumption — that the tree officer was simply recommending wholesale felling — had not survived a proper reading of the evidence. Vice-Chair Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) echoed the praise for the report's thoroughness, and asked whether it was coincidental that the two highest-value trees on the council's own amenity valuation (T9 and T20) were also the two recommended for retention. Mr Young said the correlation was not the basis for his recommendation; rather, T20 and the other retained poplars back onto a more sheltered part of the group, whereas T22–T24 sit closer to an open area of garden where a falling branch would have nowhere else to land.

Responding to a question from the Chair about future monitoring, the officer confirmed that if building movement continued despite the works being carried out, officers would review whether other, currently unimplicated trees might be responsible. He confirmed that ongoing level monitoring would be carried out by the private landowner's own structural engineer, not the council.

Decision

The committee voted to approve the officers' recommendation in full: refusing consent to fell Oak T9 and Poplars T20, T21

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and T25, on the grounds of insufficient evidence of a direct causal link to the subsidence and the harm their loss would cause to environmental quality and amenity; and approving felling of Oaks T5, T6 and T12 and Poplars T22, T23 and T24, together with crown reduction works to the four retained trees, subject to conditions.

Officers' report put a figure on what was at stake: felling all ten trees would have represented a loss of public amenity valued, using the industry-standard CAVAT (Capital Asset Value for Amenity Trees) methodology, at £954,480. The committee's part-refusal reduces that loss to £387,818.

Upcoming applications

Members briefly noted a report listing applications likely to come before the committee in September, including a called-in application at Langley Bottom Farm concerning a variation to affordable housing obligations, a residential care home proposed south of Oak Glade, and a 48-dwelling scheme across two flat buildings at Swail House, Ashley Road. A site visit to Swail House has already been requested and will be arranged ahead of that meeting.

Cllr Alison Kelly raised a query about tree and ground-levelling works she had observed while cycling past a site off Christ Church Road, near Oak Glade, asking whether it involved any protected trees. An officer said she understood the activity related to dormouse survey work, which requires regular checking of monitoring tubes, though officers agreed to look into the specific site and confirm whether any tree works taking place required scrutiny.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell Council tiptoe around stepping stones "liability".

7 November 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Environment Committee – Tuesday 30th June – has decided not to take on legal responsibility for the historic stepping stones across the Hogsmill River, after councillors concluded that accepting liability for a crossing already flagged as unsafe was too great a risk — instead backing a bid to build a new, fully accessible footbridge nearby.

The stepping stones, thought to have been installed in the early 1980s, sit within the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve and are owned by the Environment Agency (EA), which — unusually — owns both the riverbed and the banks at this location. The EA has told the council it wants to remove the stones and the steps leading down to them on safety grounds, unless another organisation takes on responsibility for their ongoing inspection, maintenance and insurance.

Why now?

Countryside Manager Stuart Cocker told the committee two problems had brought matters to a head. First, the concrete steps on the northern bank have been undermined by dogs entering and leaving the water at that point, creating a risk of collapse — the first significant repair needed on the crossing "in over 40 years," he said, with a repair cost of under £1,000. Second, a new wetland outflow channel built as part of nearby habitat restoration work has altered water levels, meaning the stones are now submerged, and therefore slippery, for much longer periods than in the past. The EA erected barriers preventing access to the stones in September 2025 following its own risk assessment.

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Mr Cocker stressed that the EA remains an active partner in the wider Hogsmill Catchment Partnership, alongside the South East Rivers Trust, and pointed to what he called significant progress over 15 to 20 years, including “new meanders in the River Hogsmill,” removal of concrete weirs, “naturalising large sections of the river channel” and reintroducing fish.

He also had some encouraging news on the water-level problem: the South East Rivers Trust has secured the Environment Agency’s permission to move gravel that has built up at the confluence with the new wetland channel, work being paid for as a “public good” clause within a separate CIL-funded contract to restore a nearby footpath. “We’re fairly confident that that will cause the water levels to recede,” Mr Cocker said, though he cautioned it might need repeating. Asked directly whether this work would persuade the EA to keep responsibility for the crossing after all, he was clear: “From what they’ve said, they still wish the stepping stones to be removed. That’s their intention” — a decision he said rests with the EA’s asset management team, based purely on flood-risk grounds, and unaffected by the availability of funds for anything beyond flood mitigation.

Four options, and a difficult choice

Officers set out four options for the committee: take on liability for the stones with no bridge; take on liability and build a bridge; decline liability but still pursue a bridge; or decline liability and accept the stones’ removal with no bridge. A Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) bid for a new pedestrian footbridge — of the kind already built nearby across the wetland outflow channel, at a cost of around £130,000 — has already been submitted, though the outcome is not yet known, and design and planning costs on top of any successful bid would still need to be found separately.

Councillors were, without exception, reluctant to see the stones disappear. Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court) told the committee: “I’m afraid I’m one of those people who used to play there as a child, and I think there’s always an element of risk in places where children play, especially when there’s water, but I would hate to see the stepping stones gone. So, I’d like to say, please don’t take the toys away.” Cllr **Julie Morris** (Independent College) said she had researched the issue and found that stepping-stone river crossings of this kind are now rare in the south of England outside Box Hill: “I haven’t really heard anybody speak in favour of getting rid of the stepping stones entirely,” she said, though she accepted that without identified funding for the fuller package of repairs, a more modest package of gravel-clearing, a handrail and a warning sign might be “a sort of halfway house at the moment.”

Cllr **Steve McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley) said he was “100% behind” retaining the stones and covering the modest repair cost, but was sharply critical of the bridge costings in the report, which he said “do not illustrate the full picture,” since design and planning funding was not specified and would in any case need approval from the Strategy and Resources Committee rather than this one. He also pressed officers on what work had been done, in the years since the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve’s management plan (which runs from 2017 to 2117, with its first review due in 2027) identified bank erosion by the stepping stones as an issue needing the Environment Agency’s attention, to actually secure that work — a question Mr Cocker answered by pointing to the partnership’s broader achievements rather than action on this specific spot.

The liability question

It was Cllr **Rachel King** (RA Town) — sitting as a substitute, and drawing on her day job dealing with insurance claims — who made the most pointed intervention against the council accepting responsibility. “You cannot sign your way out of liability,” she told the committee, warning that no amount of warning signage removes an organisation’s underlying duty of care. “I don’t think we should be taking on that liability, because we know from the report currently that they are not safe, and until they are made safe, we wouldn’t want to burden ourselves with that kind of responsibility.” She later added that the committee risked “accepting liability” before the legal review, inspection regime and insurance implications flagged in the report had actually been worked through: “It feels a bit too, too big a risk to move forward in that direction without having done that work first.”

Cllr **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford) raised a related, practical worry: that even if the stones were kept safely maintained, the steps leading down to the water would remain a magnet for children paddling regardless — and he warned that a single successful insurance claim could send premiums “up astronomically,” potentially forcing the council’s hand later anyway. Officers confirmed that if the council did not take on responsibility, the EA intends to remove both the steps and the stones.

Committee Chair Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley) also noted a case for the bridge on its own merits, separate from the liability question: with the new wetland habitat drawing more visitors to the area, she said, a bridge would open up access “for a lot more people,” including those with prams, pushchairs or bikes who cannot manage the current steps and stones.

The vote

Put to a vote option by option, the committee settled on Option 3: the council will not take on liability for the stepping stones or the steps leading to them, acknowledging that the Environment Agency may proceed to remove them, but will pursue a new, fully accessible footbridge as an alternative crossing, subject to the outcome of the CIL funding bid and further funding being secured for design and planning. Councillors formally noted the CIL application, while the report’s third recommendation — covering ongoing inspection and maintenance costs for the stones — fell away as a consequence of the vote. Closing the item, Cllr Frost reflected: “I think it’s a very difficult one, because I think we all acknowledge how much we like the stepping stones, and I really hope that somebody else will be able to take on the responsibility, but that’s not really for this meeting.”

Sam Jones – Reporter

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Photo: Stepping Stones – Hogsmill River. Credit Brigitte Jeffs

Epsom and Ewell countryside volunteers face uncertain times

7 November 2026



Epsom and Ewell's army of countryside volunteers faces uncertain times as responsibility for protecting the borough's wildlife habitats shifts next year to a new East Surrey council. The fear is that nature conservation will slide down the priority list during the upheaval of local government reform.

Dozens of local people turn out in all weathers to help nature thrive in places such as Epsom Common, Horton Country Park and on the Hogsmill, an internationally rare chalk stream where water voles were reintroduced last year. More than 40 percent of the borough is open space for the public and visitors to enjoy, or other green belt land. Their work varies widely from opening up woodland glades and removing invasive plants to tending orchards and laying woodchip footpaths. Caring for juniper bushes, which are critically declining in Britain, is an important task on the Epsom Downs.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council leads much of this conservation work, supervising the volunteers and organising contractors to carry out bigger jobs. However, it is due for abolition under a major shakeup of local government when East Surrey takes over in April 2027. Little is known about how the countryside, which provided residents with uncrowded space to exercise and enjoy nature during the Covid pandemic, will be managed in future. Work on the transfer of powers has only just begun, and where the new council will be based has yet to be decided.

Local people caring for local nature

Amid the uncertainty, volunteers are anxious to ensure that local people keep caring for local nature, and that residents retain ready access to their woods, wildflower meadows and riverbanks. "To preserve what we've got takes a lot of work, and in Epsom and Ewell it's largely done by volunteers. My concern is it continues to get done," said David Dixon, a volunteer for the past 10 years. "Volunteers are not going to travel 20 miles to do it, they want to do it locally. The worry is that it'll be subsumed into some sort of central authority who won't know the local areas, who won't really know the tasks that are needed," said Dixon, one of a roughly 10-strong group led by the Council's Countryside Team that meets every Thursday.

Volunteers in various countryside groups collectively work about 8,800 hours a year in the borough. Their task is to maintain and improve the biodiversity of local sites which are home to the likes of kingfishers, endangered great crested newts and a rare population of all five UK species of hairstreak butterfly. Native roe deer also roam, peregrine falcons visit from a nearby nest and cuckoos are once again heard, all within a stone's throw of the town centre.

Risks and opportunities

The aggregate hours figure has been collated by Dave King, who chairs the Epsom Common Association (ECA), and Geoff Delamere, a countryside volunteer since 2018. In a briefing paper they detail the risks and opportunities raised by the reform which will replace Surrey's two levels of local government with a single tier. https://bit.ly/4bvgZnR

At a time when council budgets are under heavy strain those 8,800 hours equate notionally to almost £112,000 worth of voluntary labour a year, based on the National Living Wage rate. Volunteer work keeps down the cost of managing the borough's two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), five Local Nature Reserves and six ancient woodlands. "We're pretty good value for money," said King. The ECA's EcoVols group works on the Common two days a month for much of the year, with 10–15 volunteers typically turning out.

Epsom and Ewell's professional countryside officers are paid from the Council budget but they amount to just three full time equivalent staff. Most of the work they lead is funded externally, largely from UK government countryside

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stewardship schemes. When they aren't working outdoors, Council officers may be at a computer applying for such funding or environmental grants from other sources.

A vision for nature

The modest cost of countryside management means it risks being overshadowed by much bigger budget items that East Surrey will take over. "I fear that wildlife and nature reserves may be well down the priority list," said King. "We need people who understand the site, have a vision for the site." ECA volunteers also make charcoal for sale and check the welfare of cattle that graze the Common in the summer.

A new body, East Surrey Joint Committee, is overseeing the transition and aims to ensure all services move smoothly into the new arrangement. It met for the first time only in January and will work until voters elect East Surrey councillors on May 7. East Surrey will then act as a shadow authority until April 1 next year when it takes over, with the borough continuing to run services in the meantime. Ultimately, decisions about how countryside management, including volunteering, are funded and run will be made by the East Surrey Council.

Countryside management is not the only thing surrounded by uncertainty. Arrangements have to be made for the wide range of services currently provided by Surrey's 11 borough and district councils, all of which will be subsumed into either West or East Surrey.

Knowledge and expertise

Epsom and Ewell has a large body of other volunteers working in everything from litterpicking to helping run Bourne Hall Museum. Council leader Hannah Dalton, who sits on the East Surrey Joint Committee, did not respond to a request for comment. However, Residents' Association councillor Liz Frost, chair of the borough's Environment Committee, expressed gratitude for countryside volunteers. "Their essential work, local knowledge and expertise help ensure that our residents and visitors can enjoy easy access to nature and open spaces across the borough," she said in a statement.

Such work relies on council leadership and support. The Thursday group attended by Dixon and Delamere is run directly by the Epsom and Ewell Countryside Team, which draws up a work programme, provides equipment and supervises the volunteers. The group typically cuts back undergrowth to allow veteran trees – some more than 300 years old – space to flourish. In the spring they erect electric fencing so that cattle, including the gentle "Belties" – Belted Galloways marked by broad white stripes around their bellies – can graze and help maintain habitats.

Feargal Sharkey support

At other times volunteers uproot Himalayan balsam, a colourful but highly invasive Victorian import which chokes native vegetation along many of Britain's rivers, including the Hogsmill. Volunteers also control ragwort in Nonsuch Park, allowing grassland to be mown for hay, which must be free of the plant as it is harmful to horses. The park has its own volunteer team, the Nonsuch Voles.

Such work is hard but rewarding. "It's the most enjoyable 'job' I've had," said Delamere. "It's outdoors and good exercise, as well as being useful for the environment and biodiversity." He added that companionship and learning new skills are key benefits, along with positive comments from passers-by. "Long may this mix of professionals and volunteers continue."

On Epsom Common, the Council Countryside Team agrees a conservation programme for the independently-run EcoVols to carry out. "They do a lot for us," said King, noting work such as scrub clearance and chainsaw operations. "We cost about a pound per volunteer hour," he added.

Skylarks and kestrels

Other groups operate across wider areas including Epsom and Ewell. The Lower Mole Partnership works throughout northeast Surrey and neighbouring Kingston, while the Surrey Wildlife Trust manages Priest Hill where skylarks and kestrels are commonly seen. The Woodland Trust owns Langley Vale Wood, and the South East Rivers Trust is active on the Hogsmill. Local volunteer groups also include the Epsom and Ewell Tree Advisory Board and the Friends of Horton Country Park.

Much of this work is not discretionary. Environmental legislation requires biodiversity to be enhanced, so these efforts must continue into the future. "Volunteers are going to have to work locally," said Dixon. "And the people who decide what has to be done are going to have to have a good local knowledge."

David Stamp is a member of the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council countryside volunteers group.

Photo: A volunteer clears undergrowth in Horton Country Park

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