

# Epsom and Ewell countryside volunteers face uncertain times

23 March 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 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

Related reports:

[Epsom Common 19th Green Flag Award](#)

[Epsom Common Association: A History of Conservation and Biodiversity](#)

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## **Rare moth rediscovery secures conservation status for Epsom's Manor Open Space**

23 March 2026



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sam Jones - Reporter



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

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## 100 years campaigning to keep Surrey Green

23 March 2026



Dear Surrey,

The countryside is your greatest achievement. A beautiful masterpiece built by centuries of collaboration between people and nature. From meadows and woodlands to rivers, coasts, and the green spaces that bind us together, the countryside connects and sustains us all.

For a century, the Campaign to Protect Rural England has been its guardian. Despite the relentless, growing pressure on our landscapes, we've stood up for the countryside and helped give the people who love it a voice. That will never change.

Many of the pressures facing our countryside today were familiar to our founders - not least the challenge of providing homes, infrastructure and prosperity on a small island. But new pressures have emerged with more catastrophic impacts on the land we love. Nature is in freefall and climate change threatens to alter our landscapes for good.

Now more than ever, decisions about how we use our land are leading to the needless loss of landscapes and everything they support. Without drastic action, much of what makes our countryside unique and beautiful will be lost.

Wherever we live, we rely on the countryside for clean air, home grown food, thriving wildlife and resilience in the face of climate change. Yet these foundations are being chipped away. Too often decisions are shaped by profit, not what's needed most - and the countryside pays the price.

Here in Surrey, we have even been faced with a series of major housing developments, access roads, 'solar farms' and 'battery energy storage systems', in Green Belt countryside. Many of these sites are on the edge of the Surrey Hills National Landscape itself.

Now, as 2026 dawns we are now battling a growing number of planning applications which rely on councils downgrading Green Belt land to so-called 'grey belt', as well as excessive and unsustainable housebuilding targets imposed on local communities.

Our centenary vision is for a countryside that's greener, more resilient and protected for future generations. There is a better way - one we're calling for, and one everyone can be part of:

- Stop the loss of countryside. Let's protect what we love and do everything we can to make sure green fields and woodlands aren't needlessly lost.
- Improve the quality of the countryside for future generations. That means thriving communities, clean rivers, healthy food and resilient landscapes rich in nature.
- Inspire more people to care for the countryside. A countryside for all where more people take action to enjoy and protect it.

Across the country, people are already showing what's possible - restoring hedgerows, rethinking development and sustainable farming, and making space for nature.

As we begin our centenary year, we're sending this message to everyone: love your countryside and be part of its future. This is just the beginning - and we all have a part to play in shaping what comes next. If you share this vision, join the movement today, add your name to this letter and stand with us.

Yours faithfully,

Andy Smith

Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (Surrey)

Photo: Surrey Hills Credit Aleksey Maksimov CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED

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

23 March 2026



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

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

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

### **Governance of Nonsuch Park**

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

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

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

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

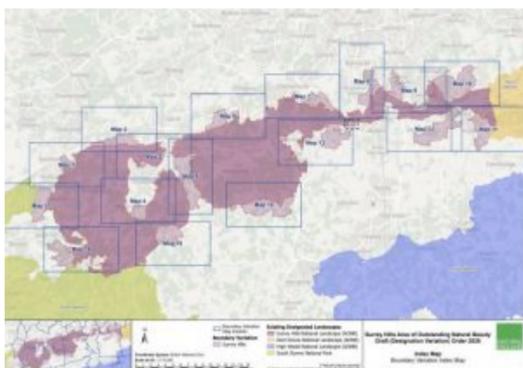
Sam Jones - Reporter



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## **Surrey Hills expansion**

23 March 2026



The Surrey Hills could be expanded for the first time since it was first designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty almost 70 years ago.

The Surrey Hills National Landscape boundary has remained the same since it was first introduced in 1958 but throughout that time there have been calls locally to reconsider increasing the beauty spot's borders.

Some of the land that lies next to the Surrey Hills is currently classed as Areas of Great Landscape Value by councils to recognise its value at a county level.

Now, Natural England is exploring whether to formally include 129 square kilometres of these areas into the Surrey Hills National Landscape following a series of consultations on the proposed extensions.

The first took place in 2023 with 1,518 people taking part, a second held in 2024 received over 375 responses. Natural England's report read: "The evidence provided through the first consultation process presented strong arguments to include additional land in the Surrey Hills.

"Following the decision to add further land to the proposal a second round of consultation was required in accordance with our duties under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

"The second consultation was launched with stakeholders invited to provide a response on the changes to our proposals, including further additions, minor deletions and new land in East Hampshire. We received over 375 responses to the second consultation, the vast majority of which were supportive of the proposals."

The final review period, which the public can take part in, runs until January 14, 2026. The prime purpose of the designation is to conserve and enhance the natural and scenic beauty although it understands that the Surrey Hills is not a museum, and development may need to take place.

"A fundamental role of the local planning authorities is to ensure that the very features that make the Surrey Hills special and worthy of its designation are protected. This is achieved by strict development plan policies and through the vigilant exercise of development management powers.

"The Surrey Hills Management Plan seeks to ensure that both are applied in a consistent manner across the National Landscape. Development proposals should take into account any Landscape Character Assessments for the locality and the Surrey Hills publication", the Surrey Hills National Landscape website reads.

The draft Order 2026 relates to an area of approximately 129 square kilometres in the counties of Surrey, Hampshire and Greater London in and around:

- Wey Valley, Farnham (in Waverley Borough Council)
- Hog's Back (in Guildford Borough Council)
- Binscombe Hills (in Guildford Borough Council)
- Wey Valley (in Waverley and Guildford Borough Councils)
- Enton Hills (in Waverley Borough Council)
- Cranleigh Waters (in Waverley and Guildford Borough Councils)
- Hatchlands and East Clandon (in Guildford Borough Council)
- Headley Hills (in Mole Valley District Council)
- Chipstead Valleys (in Reigate and Banstead Borough Council)
- Happy Valley (in Tandridge District Council and London Borough of Croydon)
- Caterham Woods (in Tandridge District Council)
- Woldingham Valleys (in Tandridge District Council and London Borough of Bromley)
- Limpsfield (in Tandridge District Council)
- Godstone Hills (in Tandridge District Council)
- Betchworth Hills and Mole Valley (in Reigate and Banstead Borough Council and Mole Valley District Council)
- Ockley Low Weald (in Waverley Borough Council and Mole Valley District Council)
- Dunsfold Low Weald (in Waverley Borough Council)
- Whitemoor Vale (in East Hampshire District Council)
- Ludshott and Bramshott Comms (in East Hampshire District Council)
- Dockenfield Hills (in Waverley Borough Council and East Hampshire District Council)
- Minor boundary refinements (various)

Copies of the draft Orders and maps are also available for download online from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/surrey-hills-area-of-outstanding-natural-beauty-boundary-variation>.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Graphic: Surrey Hills (image Natural England)

# Surrey's Satellite bio-diversity project promoted at COP30 Brazil

23 March 2026



Surrey's Space4Nature project, which uses satellite data and community science to protect biodiversity across the county, is currently being showcased by the UK Government at the COP30 UK Pavilion in Belém, Brazil (10–21 November 2025). The display forms part of the UK's official presentation of research and innovation tackling global climate and nature challenges.

Co-led by the University of Surrey's Centre for Environment and Sustainability (CES) in collaboration with Surrey Wildlife Trust, Buglife, and the Painshill Park Trust, Space4Nature brings together scientists, local communities and conservation groups to map and monitor key habitats across Surrey - from chalk grasslands to heathlands and acid grasslands that support some of the nation's rarest species.

Using advanced satellite imagery and artificial intelligence trained with data from local volunteers, the project can classify habitats to Level 4 of the UKHab system - producing one of the most detailed environmental maps of its kind. This allows conservation partners to pinpoint where biodiversity is under threat and focus restoration efforts, such as reconnecting fragmented chalk grasslands - often called the "rainforests of Europe" for their carbon storage and rich biodiversity.

Surrey Wildlife Trust plays a central role in Space4Nature, leading the project's citizen science programme, training volunteers and coordinating the collection of field data that makes its satellite and AI mapping possible. The Trust's on-the-ground expertise connects technology and conservation, turning local knowledge into invaluable data for protecting Surrey's landscapes.

Dr Ana Andries, Lecturer in Remote Sensing and GIS at the University of Surrey, and project lead, said:

"We're using satellite data and artificial intelligence in a way that directly supports conservation on the ground. Citizen scientists help train our machine learning models, thus turning local field data into high-resolution habitat maps that reveal where biodiversity is under threat. To see our work featured on a global stage at COP30 highlights how our region's innovation and collaboration can help shape the future of biodiversity monitoring."

Andrew Jamieson, Space4Nature Project Manager at Surrey Wildlife Trust, says:

"It's time for conservation organisations like ours to step outside traditional boundaries and focus not just on land management and individual species recovery, but also on delivering the tools and partnerships that will drive change on a landscape level. This project exemplifies that approach."

Space4Nature was among the first projects in the United Kingdom to receive Space for Climate Observatory (SCO) accreditation from the UK's Space4Climate network, recognising its excellence in using Earth observation data to tackle environmental challenges. This year, it has been selected as one of just 19 organisations featured in the UK Government's Pavilion at COP30, with a video and QR-linked display presented by government representatives throughout the conference.

Dr Zoe M Harris, Director of Surrey's Centre for Environment and Sustainability and Co-Director of the Institute for Sustainability, said:

"The Centre for Environment and Sustainability was founded on the idea that solving environmental challenges means bringing disciplines and people together. Space4Nature embodies that vision - combining engineering, data science and community insight to create practical tools for nature recovery. Seeing this work recognised at COP30 highlights Surrey's role as a global leader in sustainability research and innovation."

Surrey University



Image: Centre for Environment and Sustainability, University of Surrey

Epsom and Ewell Times adds - the Surrey project is one of only twenty presented by the UK at the COP30 summit. See the full list [HERE](#).

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## Walk brings the wonders of the Solar System to Nonsuch Park

23 March 2026



**Epsom & Ewell, Saturday 25th October 2025 – Visitors to Nonsuch Park can now enjoy a journey through the Solar System thanks to the successful launch of the Nonsuch Park Solar Walk, officially opened on Saturday in a well-attended community event celebrating science, nature, and local heritage.**

The Solar Walk is an engaging, scaled model of the Solar System stretching through one of Epsom & Ewell’s most loved green spaces. Each planet is represented by an informative plaque showing its relative distance and size in comparison to the Sun — helping visitors of all ages experience the vastness of space in an accessible and educational way.

Developed in partnership with the Ewell Astronomical Society (EAS), the project combines outdoor recreation with science learning in a fun and interactive way. The EAS provided their astronomical expertise and educational input, helping to bring the concept to life for residents and visitors alike.

“Anyone visiting the park can now experience the scale and vastness of our Solar System whilst enjoying the beautiful surroundings of the historic park,” the Society explains on its website.

The launch event saw local councillors, community volunteers, and families take part in guided walks, children’s activities, and talks from members of the EAS.

Cllr Steven McCormick said: “The Solar Walk is a fantastic addition to Nonsuch Park — blending education, exercise, and the beauty of our surroundings. It’s ideal for families, schools, and visitors of all ages, and it’s a perfect activity to enjoy together this half term.”

The Solar Walk encourages everyone — from young children discovering the planets for the first time to adults curious about astronomy — to explore the park, learn something new, and stay active outdoors. It’s a great way to spend quality time with family and friends during the half-term break.

Nonsuch Park continues to be a cherished green space for Epsom & Ewell residents, offering a mix of recreation, history, and natural beauty. The Solar Walk adds a new dimension for visitors — quite literally — to walk among the planets.

For more information about the Solar Walk, including trail maps and learning materials, visit the Ewell Astronomical Society website.

Space walk launch Nonsuch Park. Featuring Epsom and Ewell Mayor Cllr Robert Leach (2nd from right) and Cllr Steven McCormick (RA Surrey County and EEBC Woodcote and Langley ward)

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## Cuddington birdwatch could go Epsom and Ewell Borough-wide?

23 March 2026



What started as a local experiment in Cuddington has grown into one of Epsom and Ewell's liveliest community-led wildlife projects.

After hearing news of the planned Grafton Stables nature reserve, local councillor and Heritage Champion **Kim Spickett** (RA Cuddington) invited members of the resident-led ERLIBIRD group (Elmstead Red Listed Bird Project) to help track bird and wildlife sightings in local gardens and parks.

A handful of streets joined in at first – but the idea quickly took off. A growing list of sightings is now published online as a **Cuddington Bioguide** (view here), with residents of all ages contributing.

“People are genuinely surprised by how much wildlife we have right here on our doorsteps,” Cllr Spickett told the *Epsom and Ewell Times*. “Smartphones and our street WhatsApp groups – originally just for neighbourhood watch – have given everyone the chance to learn, share and get involved. It's sociable, it's educational, and it brings real joy to people who might not be able to get outdoors themselves.”

### A ‘nature superhighway’ through the borough

The Hogsmill River, cutting through the borough towards the Thames, provides the backbone for what residents have dubbed a “nature superhighway”. New initiatives such as a mammal tunnel at Malden Manor and fish passes along the river mean that creatures from bats to kingfishers can navigate the area more safely. The forthcoming Grafton Stables reserve is expected to act as a “service station” for migrating birds using the Hogsmill as a flight path.

Suburban gardens, railway embankments and small urban green spaces all play their part in supporting biodiversity. Conservation work in neighbouring boroughs Sutton and Kingston also influences what residents see in Cuddington, underlining how ecological networks cut across council boundaries.

### Citizen science in action

The Cuddington Bioguide is part of a wider movement often described as “citizen science” – where local knowledge and volunteer time help build valuable datasets for conservationists.

Across Surrey, residents are already engaged in projects such as **tree-mapping by EETAB** (details here), seasonal species guides from the **Surrey Wildlife Trust** (visit here), and river monitoring supported by the **South East Rivers Trust**.

Digital tools have accelerated the trend. Facebook groups such as the **Hogsmill Nature Reserve** page have become hubs where experts and beginners alike share photographs, swap advice and flag up urgent issues like pollution or vandalism. Nationally, projects like the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch and Butterfly Conservation's annual count show how mass participation can generate serious research data while fostering community pride.

### Growing beyond Cuddington

Cllr Spickett believes other wards could easily copy the model:

“Every residents' association or friends group could nominate a local enthusiast to pull together sightings. It doesn't have to be ward-wide – start with your street or park. Like everything else in the borough it runs on those magic fairies called volunteers, but the rewards are huge. We hope to keep our list running year on year so we can see how weather patterns and human activity – both good and bad – affect what we see.”

Plans are already in place to create a 2026 sightings page for Cuddington. The longer-term aim is to build a record that not only captures the delight of local birdwatchers but also contributes to understanding how climate and land management shape Surrey's wildlife over time.

Sam Jones – Reporter Related reports: Grafton Stables to Remain Green Space

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## Water voles return to Ewell

23 March 2026



Once extinct in the county, the much-loved water vole has today (30th July) made an historic return to the Upper Hogsmill in Epsom & Ewell. This milestone is the result of a pioneering wetland restoration project led by the South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and reintroduction project by rewilding organisation Citizen Zoo, with support from Wildwood Trust, Natural England Species Recovery Programme, Thames Water and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

Around 50 water voles were released onto the Hogsmill river and Chamber Meads wetland this morning at a celebratory

event. This was the culmination of many years of work by the South East Rivers Trust, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Citizen Zoo, and partners to restore the river and create the new wetland habitat. The return of this endangered species marks a major milestone for Surrey’s biodiversity and one of the most exciting rewilding projects in the region.

“Water voles were once a familiar sight on the Hogsmill, but due to habitat loss and invasive predators, they died out. Now, after years of dedicated river restoration work, and the creation of the flagship wetland at Chamber Mead, as well as extensive monitoring by a band of dedicated local volunteers-, we’re thrilled to have brought them back to the upper Hogsmill in Surrey,” said **Dr Bella Davies**, CEO of the South East Rivers Trust.

The **Wildwood Trust**, based in Kent and Devon, is one of the UK’s leading centres for conservation breeding, and bred 50 water voles through its expert captive breeding programme for release on the upper Hogsmill river. Wildwood has played a key role in restoring water vole populations across the UK.

“The UK’s biodiversity is facing a critical decline - putting our ecosystems, food security, and climate resilience at risk,” said **Tyrone Capel**, Conservation Officer at Wildwood Trust. “Ambitious rewilding projects like this are central to our mission: returning nature to the places it once thrived. We’re proud to support this initiative by breeding water voles for release along the Hogsmill and ultimately reversing the near 20 year extinction of Water voles in Surrey.”

The creation of the **Chamber Mead wetlands** and river restoration work undertaken by SERT has improved conditions on the Hogsmill and transformed the area into an ideal habitat for water voles. This work forms part of SERT’s broader vision to revive this rare urban chalk stream and inspire nature recovery in towns and cities.

**Citizen Zoo**, a rewilding organisation that has delivered a previous successful water vole release along the Hogsmill further downstream in Kingston, led on the reintroduction. The team is now calling for local volunteers to support ongoing monitoring of the population.

“This is not just a win for water voles—it’s a flagship moment for urban river restoration across the UK,” said **Elliot Newton**, -Director of Rewilding at Citizen Zoo. “With the help of local people, we’re giving this species a real chance to thrive again.”

“We are deeply committed to protecting and nurturing habitats that help biodiversity flourish, and we are honoured that the Upper Hogsmill River in our borough has been chosen as the second release site for the reintroduction of water voles.” said **Councillor Liz Frost**, Chair of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Environment Committee. “They will be the first water voles living in the wild in Surrey for over 20 years. This milestone reflects the strength of our partnerships to create the right conditions for these once-extinct animals to thrive and reflects our borough’s dedication to managing biodiversity and creating resilient ecosystems that play a role in tackling climate change.”

Water voles—made famous as Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*—are one of the UK’s fastest-declining mammals, having disappeared from 94% of their former range. Their return to Surrey is both a symbolic and ecological milestone.

Wild Wood Trust

## Epsom Common 19th Green Flag Award

23 March 2026



Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve’s enduring excellence recognised with 19th consecutive Green Flag Award

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is celebrating receiving the prestigious Green Flag Award for Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve, the international quality mark for parks and green spaces, for a 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive year.

Councillor **Liz Frost**, (RA Woodcote and Langley Vale) Chair of the Environment Committee said: “We are incredibly proud that Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve has received its 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive Green Flag Award! This is an outstanding achievement and a true testament to the dedication and hard work of our Countryside team, volunteers, and partners as they create and maintain habitats that help biodiversity to flourish.

“Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and as such it is important that we continue to protect and nurture its distinct habitats and wildlife for future generations to enjoy. A huge thanks to our Countryside team, volunteers and partners for helping us make a difference to our green spaces, including the Epsom Common Association, the Lower Mole Partnership and Natural England.”

Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve dates back to Saxon times and is a nationally and internationally important wildlife site. It is designated a ‘Site of Specific Scientific Interest’ due to its rare insects and its importance of breeding bird habitat. This local nature reserve contains oak woods, open pasture woodland and wetland habitats, including large ponds, and hosts species including cotton spotted orchids and purple emperor butterflies.

To find out more about the walks and tours taking place, managed by the Countryside team at the council, take a look here: [What's on | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council](#).

Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve is one of 2,250 parks and green spaces in the UK to achieve the award.

Green Flag Award Scheme Manager, Paul Todd MBE, said: "Congratulations to everyone involved in Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve who have worked tirelessly to ensure that it achieves the high standards required for the Green Flag Award.

"Quality parks and green spaces like Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve make the country a healthier place to live and work in, and a stronger place in which to invest. Crucially, Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve is a vital green space for communities in the borough of Epsom and Ewell to enjoy nature, and during the ongoing cost of living crisis it is a free and safe space for families to socialise. It also provides important opportunities for local people and visitors to reap the physical and mental health benefits of green space."

The Green Flag Award scheme, managed by environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy under licence from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, recognises and rewards well-managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of green spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

**More information about Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve - Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**

**The Green Flag Award Scheme** (<http://greenflagaward.org/>) is run by the environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy, under licence from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, in partnership with Keep Scotland Beautiful, Keep Wales Tidy and Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful.

Any green space that is freely accessible to the public is eligible to enter for a Green Flag Award. Awards are given on an annual basis, and winners must apply each year to renew their Green Flag Award status. A Green Flag Community Award recognises quality sites managed by voluntary and community groups. Green Heritage Site Accreditation is judged on the treatment of the site's historic features and the standard of conservation.