



# Epsom Stands in Solidarity with Ukraine on War's Third Anniversary

Epsom's Market Place was a scene of unity and reflection today as residents, dignitaries, and members of the Ukrainian community gathered to mark the third anniversary (24th February) of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Organised by the Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network (EERN) and Epsom based Surrey Stands With Ukraine (SSWU), the event served as a powerful demonstration of the town's enduring support for those affected by the war.

The Worshipful The Mayor of Epsom & Ewell, Councillor **Steve Bridger**, (RA Stamford) and the Mayoress, Carol Bridger, attended the commemoration, reaffirming the borough's commitment to standing in solidarity with Ukraine.

## "Kindness Will Prevail"

The event opened with a speech from **Jo Sherring**, co-founder of EERN, who highlighted the strong bonds forged between the local and Ukrainian communities. "We are privileged to have met and worked with such wonderful people, and we will continue to support them as long as they need our help," she said. EERN supports as many as 80 or more families from Ukraine. Mainly women and children.

**Roy Deadman**, Chair of SSWU, praised the tireless efforts of volunteers who have dedicated time and resources to aid Ukraine. "The support for Ukraine we have seen today from this wonderful community still shows us that kindness will prevail in a world that feels very dark right now," he said. SSWU has sent a van of civilian aid nearly every week since the war began and thousands of pounds of aid for humanitarian projects in Ukraine.

The two charities work together in offices generously provided by the Ashley Centre and for which the Council has waived all business rates.

## MP's Message of Support

Epsom & Ewell's MP, **Helen Maguire**, who was unable to attend in person, sent a statement which was read aloud to the assembled crowd. She paid tribute to Ukraine's resilience and urged continued support for its fight against Russian aggression.

"Three years ago, the world watched in horror as Putin launched his brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. I am proud that Epsom's community has gathered here today to say what we have said from the very beginning: We stand with Ukraine. We stand with its people. And we will not waver," she said.

Ms Maguire described Ukraine's battle as one for "democracy, sovereignty, and the right of nations to choose their own future." She praised the courage of the Ukrainian people, whether on the battlefield or in communities enduring relentless attacks, displacement, and loss.

"To our Ukrainian friends here today: you are not alone. We have not forgotten you, and we will continue to support you, in both word and action, for as long as it takes," she added.

The MP also called for the UK to take a leadership role in supporting Ukraine's victory, advocating for military assistance and the seizure of Russian assets to aid in reconstruction. "The future of Ukraine must be decided by Ukrainians," she said.

## Emotional Tributes

The gathering featured a powerful performance by **Helin Konyar**, a third-year student at Laine Theatre Arts and a Ukrainian national, who sang Ukraine's spiritual anthem *God Save Ukraine*. Her performance deeply moved those in attendance.

A particularly poignant moment came from **Constantin Ryzhikov**, a blind Ukrainian refugee, who shared his heartfelt gratitude for Britain's support. He spoke about the difficulties faced by Ukrainians both in their homeland and those who have sought refuge abroad, moving many in the audience to tears.

The event also included a prayer led by Deacon **Gary Carter** of St Joseph's Church in Epsom, calling for peace and strength for those suffering in Ukraine.



## A Show of Unity

The commemoration ended with the Ukrainian national anthem, once again performed by Helin Konyar. The assembled crowd joined in a moment of solemn reflection, standing in solidarity with Ukraine.

As the war enters its fourth year, the event served as a poignant reminder of Epsom's unwavering support for Ukraine and the power of community in times of crisis.

## Ukrainian Culture

Since the war talented Ukrainian musicians and a local Ukraine Choir come together for the 11th Ukraine Music Evening since the war began. Held at 6pm on Saturday 22nd March in the Worship Area of the Epsom Methodist Church in Ashley Road. Entry is free and a leaving collection is dedicated to support the musicians whose livelihoods have been cut in their homeland.

For more information on how to support Ukraine locally, visit:

- **Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network:** [www.epsomrefugeenetwork.org](http://www.epsomrefugeenetwork.org)
- **Surrey Stands With Ukraine:** [www.surreystandswithukraine.org](http://www.surreystandswithukraine.org)

Image: Roy Deadman of SSWU addresses the crowd alongside Jo Sherring of EERN and Deacon Gary Carter (Credit Nina Kaye)

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## Surrey Uni Zebrafish Study Links Blood Pressure Drug to Potential ADHD Treatment

A commonly prescribed blood pressure medication could offer a safer alternative for treating ADHD symptoms, according to a new study involving the University of Surrey. The findings suggest that amlodipine, a well-established drug for managing hypertension, may help reduce hyperactivity and impulsivity, key characteristics of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

### From Fish to Humans: Genetic Links in ADHD Research

The study, published in *Neuropsychopharmacology*, tested five potential drugs in rats genetically bred to exhibit ADHD-like symptoms. Of these, only amlodipine significantly reduced hyperactivity. To validate the findings, researchers turned to zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), an important model organism in neurological studies, which shares approximately **70% of its genes** with humans. The zebrafish trials confirmed that amlodipine reduces hyperactivity and impulsivity, and for the first time, researchers confirmed that the drug crosses the blood-brain barrier, directly influencing brain function.

Further analysis of human genetic data reinforced the findings, showing that ADHD is linked to calcium channels in the brain—the same targets of amlodipine. A review of UK-wide patient records further strengthened the case, revealing that individuals taking amlodipine reported fewer mood swings and a lower tendency for risk-taking behaviour.

Dr Matthew Parker, co-author of the study from the University of Surrey, noted:

*“Repurposing amlodipine, a well-established blood pressure medication, offers a promising and swift pathway to address ADHD symptoms. Our research indicates that, due to its existing approval and safety profile, amlodipine could be rapidly redeployed as a treatment option for ADHD, potentially providing relief to patients sooner than developing new medications.”*



## Why Zebrafish? The Genetic Overlap with Humans

Zebrafish have become an invaluable model in medical research due to their high genetic similarity with humans. In fact, they share a greater proportion of their genes with humans than many might expect. Some examples include:

- **Chimpanzees** (~98-99%) - our closest genetic relatives.
- **Mice** (~85%) - widely used in biomedical research.
- **Dogs** (~84%) - studied for genetic diseases and neurological conditions.
- **Zebrafish** (~70%) - a crucial model for studying brain function and drug effects.
- **Fruit flies** (~60%) - key for understanding genetics and neurobiology.

Because of this genetic overlap, zebrafish are often used in drug discovery, particularly for neurological disorders. Their transparent embryos and rapid development allow scientists to study the effects of medications in real-time.

## A Safer Alternative to Existing ADHD Medications?

Current ADHD treatments, such as stimulant medications, are effective but often come with significant side effects, including appetite loss, high blood pressure, headaches, and sleep disturbances. Additionally, stimulant medications carry a risk of misuse. Amlodipine, already widely prescribed and well-tolerated, could offer a new alternative with a safer profile.

With approximately **25% of ADHD patients not responding well to existing treatments**, the need for new options is urgent. If further clinical trials confirm these findings, amlodipine could be repurposed as an ADHD treatment much faster than developing a brand-new drug, providing relief for patients sooner.

The study highlights the importance of genetic research in understanding brain disorders and demonstrates how unlikely connections—such as a heart medication treating a neurodevelopmental condition—can lead to breakthroughs in medical science.

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## Surrey sink-hole major incident

A significant sinkhole has emerged on Godstone High Street in Surrey, leading to evacuations and widespread disruptions. The incident began on Monday night when a section of the road collapsed, revealing a hole filled with water. By Tuesday morning, the sinkhole had expanded to approximately 20 metres in length and 6 metres in width.

Surrey County Council has declared the situation a major incident, with the Surrey Local Resilience Forum overseeing the response. Assistant Director for Safer Communities, Carl Bussey, stated that efforts are underway in collaboration with emergency services, utility companies, and Tandridge District Council to ensure public safety and restore essential services.

The sinkhole's rapid expansion has led to the evacuation of around 30 properties within a 100-metre cordon. Residents have been advised to avoid the area while investigations and repairs are conducted. The incident has also resulted in the closure of Godstone High Street between Oxted Road and Bletchingley Road, with diversions in place for the foreseeable future.

The cause of the sinkhole is believed to be a burst water main. SES Water has confirmed that engineers are on-site working to repair the damaged pipe and restore water supplies to affected homes. In the interim, bottled water is being distributed to residents.

Local residents have expressed concerns over the incident. Some evacuees have reported hearing cracking sounds and witnessing the sinkhole's growth overnight. One resident described the scene as resembling the aftermath of an earthquake, with buckled roads and pavements.

Authorities are urging the public to follow updates from Surrey County Council, Surrey Highways, and Tandridge District Council on social media for the latest information regarding the situation.



# Prominent Residents Association Councillor leaves the fold

Councillor **Alex Coley**, who has represented Ruxley Ward in Ewell for seven years, has announced his resignation from the ruling Residents' Association (RA) group, opting to serve as an Independent councillor. In his resignation letter addressed to RA Group Chair **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) on 11 February 2025, Cllr Coley expressed deep concerns about the council's financial trajectory and his inability to support the proposed 2025/26 budget.

Throughout his tenure, Cllr Coley has been instrumental in advancing several key initiatives, including the Climate Change Action Plan, the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy, and the Community Safety Strategy. He also played a pivotal role in enhancing governance and transparency as Vice Chair of Audit & Scrutiny and of Standards & Constitution.

He also stood as an independent candidate in the last election for Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner receiving a highly creditable 16% (42,062) of the vote being just a little less than half the votes cast for the Conservative Party incumbent Lisa Townsend.

He was an independent minded Councillor on 22nd March 2023 when he walked out of a Full Council meeting protesting the ruling group's pause progressing the Local Plan.

His recent efforts to promote Epsom & Ewell as a cultural and creative destination led him to uncover unsettling truths about the council's finances and property management. "In my pursuit of this goal, I have uncovered many unhappy truths about our finances and the properties we own and operate for the benefit of our residents," he stated in his letter.

Cllr Coley voiced apprehension about the council's financial sustainability, indicating that he believes the council may face insolvency by 2026. "I have thought for some time that 2026 is the year this Council runs out of money," he remarked, highlighting a lack of clarity and planning for this potential outcome.

The RA group has maintained majority control of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council since its formation in 1937. In the 2023 local elections, the RA secured 26 out of 35 seats, reaffirming its dominant position. Despite this longstanding control, the council has faced financial challenges. In February 2021, RA leader Eber Kington acknowledged a £5.8 million deficit, underscoring the fiscal difficulties confronting the council.

Cllr Coley's departure from the RA group underscores the ongoing concerns about the council's financial health and the need for transparent and effective fiscal management. As he transitions to an Independent role, he remains committed to collaborating with residents' groups to serve the best interests of the community.

The council approved the 2025/26 budget. The budget includes a 2.98% increase in the borough council portion of council tax, equating to an additional £6.75 per year for the average Band D property. Despite this increase, Epsom & Ewell's council tax remains below the average for Surrey.

Related reports:

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## Epsom complainant changes Surrey police procedure

### Surrey Police Accepts Recommendation to Improve Retention of Body-Worn Video Evidence in Complaints

Surrey Police has agreed to implement a key recommendation from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) following a complaint by an Epsom resident regarding the retention of body-worn video (BWV) footage in police complaints.

The issue arose from an incident on 12 April 2023, when the complainant was filmed by a police officer, PC Scruby, during a meeting at his mother's address. The complainant alleged that he was not informed he was being recorded until ten minutes into their interaction. He later raised concerns that the footage, which he believed could substantiate his account, had been deleted under Surrey Police's 28-day evidence retention policy before it could be considered in his complaint.



After being dissatisfied with the response from Surrey Police's Professional Standards Department (PSD) in October 2024, the complainant appealed to the OPCC. The OPCC conducted a review and found that Surrey Police's service was acceptable in 18 out of 19 points raised in the complaint. However, it upheld one element of the complaint, determining that the complaint handler had failed to properly investigate the complainant's concerns regarding what the officer had said during the meeting.

The review confirmed that the interaction had been recorded on BWV, but the footage was not secured by Surrey Police despite the complaint being made the following day on 13 April 2023. As a result, in line with the force's BWV policy, the footage was automatically deleted from the system without being saved, rendering it unavailable as evidence in the complaint process.

In response to the case, the OPCC issued a recommendation that complaint handlers should secure any BWV footage providing evidence in a complaint against police at the earliest opportunity and, in any case, within 28 days of the alleged incident. This measure is aimed at closing a procedural gap that may hinder transparency and accountability in police investigations.

The complainant expressed frustration over the deletion of potentially valuable evidence, stating: "It is concerning that evidence which could clarify what happened during my interaction with the officer was destroyed. I welcome the OPCC's recognition that procedural changes are needed."

The OPCC's report also addressed broader concerns raised in the complaint, including allegations of inadequate communication and procedural mishandling by PSD. While it found that Surrey Police's actions were generally in line with existing procedures, the recommendation for improved evidence retention was seen as a necessary step to enhance the fairness and thoroughness of future complaint investigations.

Surrey Police confirmed that it accepted the recommendation in full on 20 January 2025, with the PSD now in the process of implementing the change.

This development highlights ongoing efforts to ensure greater accountability and efficiency in police complaint handling, reinforcing public trust in the system.

Image: West Midlands Police - CC BY-SA 2.0

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## Surrey leading the shout: "Keep the noise down will you!"

An interdisciplinary network of engineers, policymakers, industry stakeholders and social scientists, led by the University of Surrey, will take on one of the UK's most overlooked environmental challenges: noise pollution.

From the constant hum of road traffic to the thousands of flights in and out of UK airports, noise awareness in our modern world often fades into the background - but it carries significant consequences for both human health and wildlife. Noise Network Plus will focus on promoting conscious design processes to create quieter products, buildings and transportation systems - with the aim of reducing noise pollution and building a healthier environment over the next 10-15 years.

Professor Mark Plumbley, project lead and Professor of Signal Processing at the University of Surrey's Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing (CVSSP), said:

"Noise is a frequently neglected pollutant, but it has a big impact on health, society and the environment. For example, road noise can lead to sleep disturbance and heart disease, costing £7-10 billion each year in England alone. Once noise is out there, it is really hard to remove. We need to re-think how we design noise from the start."

Awarded more than £1.8 million in funding, Noise Network Plus is one of six research projects to receive a share of £10 million from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). Together they form part of its wider community engagement initiative to address 'Tomorrow's Engineering Research Challenges' (TERC), launched today (11th February), which focuses on tackling the most pressing issues facing the engineering sector.

Professor Abigail Bristow from the University of Surrey, said:

"We're at a pivotal moment in time where our environment is under threat, but we have the technology and expertise to make meaningful changes. Our mission-oriented research and innovation network will look to adopt a systems-thinking approach, addressing the root causes of noise and understanding its far-reaching impacts."



A collaboration between the University of Surrey, City St George's University of London, the University of Bath, and the University of Salford, Noise Network Plus aims to build unprecedented research capabilities to tackle the complex challenge of reducing noise and its impacts on people, the environment and the economy. Bringing together diverse teams and stakeholders, the initiative will promote inclusive dialogue and co-design innovative solutions.

Alan Hunter, Professor in Autonomous Systems based in the University of Bath's Department of Mechanical Engineering, will lead the network's efforts on underwater noise and artificial intelligence. This will include research into the effects of noise created by human activities at sea and improving the resilience of uncrewed underwater vehicles to noise. Professor Hunter said:

"The ocean is a noisy place, and a lot of the tools and technologies we rely on to deliver services either increase noise levels or are affected by noise. Taking oceanographic measurements, measuring marine wildlife populations, or inspecting underwater infrastructure, are all examples of activities affected by noise and of which we need to build a better understanding."

Professor Antonio Torija Martinez and Dr Simone Graetzer are co-leads on the project at the University of Salford's Acoustic Research Centre. Professor Martinez said:

"As the UK moves toward Net Zero, the adoption of sustainable energy and emerging technologies – such as wind turbines and drones – will introduce new sources of noise, fundamentally reshaping our soundscapes. This offers us a unique opportunity for a fresh start and through our initiative, we aim to transform the way noise is managed, embedding innovative solutions into engineering design and policy."

Professor Charlotte Clark, Professor of Environmental Epidemiology in the Population Health Research Institute at City St George's, University of London, said:

"This is a rare and timely opportunity to form multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams to develop engineering solutions addressing the problem of noise effects on health. We know that noise affects health, but we know little about how to mitigate the problem. The missions developed in the Noise Network Plus have the potential to step up mitigation efforts that will translate into major, long-term public health gains."

The launch of Noise Network Plus will take place on 18th March at Prince Philip House, the home of the Royal Academy of Engineering, in London. The event will bring together a cross-section of people from engineering and other disciplines including researchers, industry, professional institutions, policymakers, charities, and other stakeholders, to identify the challenges that need to be addressed, and plan how the Network can work to address these challenges.

Professor Adrian Hilton, Director of the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI and CVSSP, added:

"Noise Network Plus represents a significant step towards addressing an often-overlooked pollutant and its detrimental impact on people. This interdisciplinary people-centred approach aims to tackle the complex challenges of noise in our modern world and develop innovative solutions for quieter and healthier communities."

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## Surrey's new rail link to Heathrow?

Plans for a new railway connecting Surrey to Heathrow and beyond have resurfaced as the track's backers welcomed government support for a third runway at the airport. The line, called the Heathrow Southern Railway (HSR), is a privately financed proposal to link towns in Surrey to one of the world's busiest airports.

If built, it would operate between Heathrow and London Waterloo via Staines. There would also be direct trains from the airport to Woking and Guildford, before carrying on to the south coast. Heathrow Southern Railway said it also would provide for an extension of the Elizabeth Line to Staines.

Baroness Jo Valentine, the group's chairperson, said: "The UK Government has set a bold agenda for growth with its support for a third runway at Heathrow Airport. Our railway enhances that growth by increasing connectivity and reducing surface emissions. These benefits accrue with a two runway airport but will be enhanced with an additional runway. We look forward to working with all partners to make this a reality."

Mark Livock, chief executive, added: "The new Government has expressed interest in finding ways to harness private sector finance in making the delivery of major infrastructure schemes more affordable. Heathrow Southern Railway has a depth of experience in creating opportunities for private investment that could deliver tangible benefits to the UK, and southern rail access to Heathrow would positively transform public transport connectivity to Europe's busiest airport."





The group estimates that the new route would cut about millions of road journeys – with many of those from the M25. They added: “Our construction plans minimise the impact on neighbouring communities by providing a route mainly in tunnel and using only electric trains. Unlike the previous “Airtrack” proposals, HSR avoids level crossings in the Egham area.”

An HSR spokesperson said: “Our proposed route starts at Heathrow’s Terminal 5 station and is intended to run mainly in tunnel and be electrified to minimise environmental impact. It rises to the surface to connect to the existing railway near Staines and Virginia Water.”

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Hsr Proposed Route (Image Heathrow Southern Rail)

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## Elections Delayed as Surrey Faces Uncertain Future of Local Government Shake-Up

Surrey residents will have to wait an extra year to vote in the county elections following the government’s decision to postpone the polls from May 2025 to May 2026. The delay comes as part of a sweeping local government reorganisation that will see the biggest structural shake-up in fifty years. However, concerns are mounting over the rushed timetable, the fate of council debts, and the financial burden that could fall on responsible local authorities.

### Reorganisation at Speed

The government’s drive for local government reform is progressing at an accelerated pace, with councils required to submit interim proposals by 21 March 2025 and finalised plans by 9 May 2025. The reform aims to replace Surrey’s current two-tier system – where Surrey County Council oversees borough and district councils – with unitary authorities that will consolidate power at a higher level.

Under plans being considered, a directly elected mayor could manage strategic services such as policing, fire and rescue, health, and education. However, uncertainty remains over whether the new unitary system will feature a single authority covering all of Surrey’s 1.2 million residents or two to three smaller councils.

### Who Pays the Price?

A key source of controversy is the issue of existing council debts, particularly in boroughs such as Woking, Spelthorne, and Runnymede, which have amassed a combined debt exceeding £3 billion. Woking has already declared effective bankruptcy, with Spelthorne and Runnymede under government scrutiny.

Local leaders across Surrey are voicing their objections to any attempt to spread the financial burden of these debts across councils that have maintained responsible fiscal management.

Councillor Richard Biggs, leader of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, said: “Our view remains that plans should not support any restructuring of local government boundaries based on ‘redistributing’ the debt of other authorities.” His council, along with others, has worked to maintain financial stability while continuing to provide additional services beyond statutory requirements.

The Residents’ Association and Independents Group at Surrey County Council has strongly criticised the government’s approach, arguing that it is forcing through change with “zero funding” while suggesting that costs could be covered by selling off council-owned assets. Group leader Councillor Catherine Powell raised concerns that the government expects local authorities to fund reorganisation through “capital receipts,” which could mean selling buildings currently used to deliver essential services.

### Opposition to Election Postponement

The Surrey Leaders Group, a forum representing the county’s borough and district councils, has already voiced opposition to the decision to delay elections. Chair of the group, Councillor **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Epsom and Ewell for Stoneleigh ward), warned that the proposed reorganisation could remove decision-making from local communities and lacks clarity on how existing debts will be handled.

“There is a real risk that new authorities will be set up to fail,” said Cllr Dalton, highlighting the potential for new unitary councils



to inherit substantial financial liabilities without sufficient funding or support from the government.

## A Distracted Local Government

Critics argue that the rapid timeline for reorganisation is an unwelcome distraction at a time when councils are struggling with increased demand for statutory services, including social care and housing. Concerns have also been raised about the practicalities of implementing a new financial IT system for the newly formed authorities, given that Surrey County Council's recent system overhaul has been plagued with problems.

With just weeks to prepare draft proposals and a final deadline in early May, councils across Surrey are left scrambling to determine the best way forward. The government's insistence on a rapid restructuring without clear funding commitments has left many questioning whether the changes will deliver better services—or simply create further financial and administrative chaos.

For now, Surrey residents must wait for further clarity on how their local government will be reshaped, and more crucially, who will bear the cost of these sweeping changes.

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Surrey County Council election delay stirring up a storm

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All change! Epsom and Ewell Borough Council approaching its final stop?

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Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

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# Citizens Advice Epsom & Ewell Delivers Crucial Support Amid Rising Cost-of-Living Pressures

Citizens Advice Epsom & Ewell (CAEE) has revealed the scale of its impact over the past year, with thousands of local residents receiving support on a range of pressing financial and social issues. From benefits and debt advice to housing support, the charity continues to be a lifeline for many struggling to make ends meet.

## A Year of Helping the Community

Figures released by CAEE highlight just how vital their work has been. In 2024 alone, the organisation:

- Assisted **3,394 people** with **10,233 issues**
- Made **12,406 client and third-party contacts**
- Secured **£1,022,934** in additional income for clients

For January 2025, the demand for support has surged even further:

- **560 people** received help in just one month
- **1,036 issues** were handled
- **£159,670** in extra income was secured for struggling households

The most common concerns among residents remain **benefits, tax credits, housing, and debt**, reflecting the ongoing financial pressures facing families in Epsom & Ewell.





## Expanding Outreach in 2025

With the rising cost of living continuing to bite, CAEE is set to expand its **energy outreach programme** to better reach underrepresented communities. The initiative aims to provide guidance on **energy bills, debt support, benefit checks, and energy-saving advice**, ensuring that vulnerable individuals can access the help they need.

The charity is also distributing funds from the **Household Support Fund** until March 2025, offering financial aid to those on low incomes. Residents struggling with essential costs are urged to get in touch before the deadline.

## Making a Real Difference

Beyond statistics, the impact of Citizens Advice is best illustrated through the experiences of those they have helped. One such case involved a **vulnerable client** living in unsuitable accommodation, battling rent arrears and struggling with multiple health concerns.

With extensive support from CAEE, she was able to:

- Repay her rent arrears
- Secure a move to a more suitable **ground-floor flat**
- Receive **medical and financial assistance**
- Successfully challenge a dispute through the **Energy Ombudsman**

This intervention not only improved her living conditions but also stabilised her finances, demonstrating the charity's commitment to holistic, long-term support.

## Financial and Social Impact

CAEE's work delivers significant savings to public services, including:

- **£186,802** in NHS savings by reducing demand on mental health and GP services
- **£550,131** in savings for the **Department for Work and Pensions** by helping people stay in work
- **£326,078** saved for **housing providers** by preventing evictions

In total, their advice and interventions generated a staggering **£3.85 million** in value for the local economy.

## Looking Ahead: Advocacy and Research in 2025

Beyond direct support, CAEE also plays a key role in influencing policy and addressing systemic issues. In 2025, they will continue to campaign on critical concerns such as:

- **The cost-of-living crisis**
- **Housing shortages and homelessness prevention**
- **Debt, including rising council tax arrears**
- **Access to health and disability benefits**

A key event on the horizon is **Citizens Advice Data Insights**, taking place on 25th February 2025, where experts will discuss how accumulated debt is preventing people from rebuilding their lives.

## Support Your Local Citizens Advice

With demand for services higher than ever, Citizens Advice Epsom & Ewell is calling for public support. Running the service costs over **£100 per client per year**, and donations play a crucial role in ensuring free advice remains available.

Residents can contribute by donating as little as **£10 a month**, helping to sustain a vital service that continues to transform lives across the borough.



For **free, confidential advice**, visit CAEE at The Old Town Hall, The Parade, Epsom, or call **0808 278 7963**.

# Surrey County Council election delay stirring up a storm

## Surrey County Council Elections Postponed Until 2026 Amid Local Government Reforms

In a significant move reflecting the evolving landscape of local governance in England, the British government has decided to postpone the Surrey County Council elections, originally scheduled for May 2025, until May 2026. This decision aligns with the government's broader devolution agenda, which seeks to streamline local government structures by transitioning from a two-tier system to single-tier unitary authorities.

The government's devolution white paper, *Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, published in December 2024, outlines an ambitious plan to decentralize power from Westminster to local regions. A key component of this strategy is the reorganization of existing two-tier local government areas into unitary authorities, each serving populations of at least 500,000 residents. The white paper states:

"Local government reorganisation: We will work with individual areas, inviting proposals from all remaining two-tier areas and those unitary councils where there is evidence of failure or their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality services to their residents."

This restructuring aims to enhance efficiency, improve service delivery, and provide clearer accountability by consolidating responsibilities previously divided between county and district councils. The government asserts that such a model will lead to: "Better outcomes for residents, save significant money which can be reinvested in public services, and improve accountability with fewer politicians who are more able to focus on delivering for residents."

**Surrey's Inclusion in the Devolution Priority Programme:** Surrey has been selected to participate in the first wave of the government's Devolution Priority Programme. This inclusion necessitates a comprehensive review and potential reorganization of the county's local government structure.

**Tim Oliver**, (Conservative) Leader of Surrey County Council, expressed his support for the initiative, stating: "Now we've received confirmation that Surrey is in the first wave of local government reorganisation and devolution priority programme, we will develop a business case for reorganisation and submit a draft to government in March."

To facilitate this process, the government has decided to postpone the local elections scheduled for May 2025. This postponement allows the council to focus its resources on developing and implementing the reorganization plan without the immediate pressures of an electoral cycle. Oliver emphasized the practical benefits of this delay: "The resource and time that would have been spent on elections for a soon-to-be-abolished council can now be directed to working on the best possible outcome of reorganisation for Surrey."

The decision to delay the elections has elicited mixed reactions across the political spectrum. **Helen Maguire**, Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, criticized the move: "The decision to allow this Conservative-led council to postpone the election and silence the voice of our community is scandalous." She further contended that the postponement serves political interests. Maguire also highlighted concerns about the council's performance, citing issues such as "endless potholes," cuts to local frontline services, and shortcomings in supporting children with special educational needs. She concluded: "Democracy delayed is democracy denied, and the people of Epsom, Ewell, Ashted and Leatherhead must be allowed to decide who they think is best to lead Surrey County Council through this time of significant change."

The Labour Group of councillors in Epsom and Ewell, however, welcomed the postponement of the elections. Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Court Ward) stated: "Those who are calling for the elections to go ahead need to explain why we should vote again for an authority with just a year to go. It would be a costly and unnecessary exercise."

Surrey County Labour Party also expressed support for the devolution plans. Cllr Robert Evans commented: "This is good news for the people of Surrey as it will open the doors for more local decision-making as the government has agreed to devolve additional powers to new unitary authorities and regional mayors." Evans emphasized the need for modernisation: "Surrey County Council was formed in 1889 so the world is very different now. The population of Surrey has more than doubled since Victorian times and much of what was Surrey then is now in London. The boroughs and districts were formed more than fifty



years ago and don't serve the same purpose as they might have done then."

Cllr Robert King added: "In Surrey, we have a two-tier system which means service delivery can be confusing. Add to that we have 12 headquarters, 12 chief executives, dozens of deputies and more than a thousand councillors. A top-heavy system of local government does not serve our communities as well as it should."

**Jonathan Carr-West**, Chief Executive of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), acknowledged the mixed reception of the announcement within the sector: "Councils were given 16 working days to put their applications together... Countless hours were spent by council staff and elected members who worked incredibly hard over the Christmas period to meet this deadline." Carr-West emphasized the need for transparency in the decision-making process: "It is essential that we understand more about the decision making process around this as there will undoubtedly be some places that feel they have been marched up the hill and then marched down again having spent considerable amounts of time and political capital getting to this point."

**Financial Implications and Debt Concerns:** A significant aspect of the reorganization involves addressing the financial disparities among Surrey's councils. Several boroughs, such as Woking and Spelthorne, are grappling with substantial debts due to ambitious investment strategies.

Woking Borough Council declared effective bankruptcy in 2023, burdened by debts exceeding £2 billion from failed large-scale projects. Spelthorne Borough Council faces over £1 billion in debt from investments in commercial properties. In contrast, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has maintained prudent financial practices, consistently balancing its budgets and avoiding unsustainable debt levels. This disparity raises concerns about the equitable distribution of debt in the proposed unitary authority. Residents of fiscally responsible boroughs like Epsom and Ewell question the fairness of assuming responsibility for the substantial debts incurred by other councils.

Councillor **Tim Oliver** has advocated for central government intervention to address these financial challenges: "The Labour Government has set up their agenda in the white paper and that is to create Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) across England... If you don't reach an agreement locally, then they will legislate. It's going to happen. It's better that we try to control or have some influence over what happens rather than have it imposed on us down the line."

**Future Steps and Considerations:**

The postponement of the Surrey County Council elections provides a window for detailed planning and consultation regarding the proposed reorganization. The council is expected to submit a draft business case for reorganization to the government in March, with a full proposal to follow in May. The government will then evaluate these proposals, conduct consultations with affected bodies, and make decisions on the future structure of local government in Surrey.

Throughout this process, maintaining transparency and engaging with residents will be crucial. Tim Oliver sought to give assurances: "I can be absolutely clear that, throughout this process, our vital work supporting residents will continue—services will be delivered and we will still be here for those who need us most—until whatever new council is fully established to take on that delivery."

The debate over the postponement underscores broader concerns about governance, fiscal responsibility, and democratic accountability. As the reorganization progresses, the challenge will be to ensure that reforms deliver tangible benefits for Surrey's residents while preserving democratic integrity and local representation.

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