

Conditional nod to southern rail link to Heathrow

13 November 2025



Spelthorne Borough Council has agreed to support a new rail link between Staines-upon-Thames and Heathrow Airport, but only on strict environmental and local benefit conditions.

The proposed Heathrow Southern Rail (HSR) scheme would connect Heathrow Terminal 5 directly to the south-west rail network, using existing track between Staines and Windsor before running in a new tunnel under Staines Moor. Supporters say it could slash road congestion, help people reach work at the airport, and give the town's economy a boost.

Councillors say they welcome the idea in principle but have made clear that their backing comes with safeguards. They want guarantees that trains will actually stop at Staines, that there will be no damage to the sensitive Staines Moor landscape, and that the council will get to sign off on final plans once detailed studies are complete.

Cllr Chris Bateson, who led the council's review, told the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service: "We've looked at both proposals in detail. A direct rail link from Staines to Heathrow could reduce congestion and support our local economy. But we must protect Staines Moor and make sure residents benefit."

His colleague, Cllr Howard Williams, chair of the Business, Infrastructure and Growth Committee, added: "Our support relies on clear guarantees. The environment can't pay the price for progress. We will keep working with HSR to make sure residents' interests come first."

The link would run mainly in tunnel to limit disruption, emerging to join the existing railway near Staines. The promoter, Heathrow Southern Railway Ltd, says the route could remove millions of car journeys to the airport every year and cut thousands of tonnes of carbon emissions.

If built, the line could open in the second half of this decade, though no firm construction timetable has yet been confirmed. Earlier proposals suggested the service could be running between 2026 and 2028, offering a six-minute journey from Staines to Heathrow Terminal 5.

An alternative "Southern Light Rail" idea — which would have involved a surface-level route — was rejected by councillors as too intrusive, with greater impact on privacy and the landscape.

While the majority of councillors supported the HSR plan with safeguards, some voiced concern that the benefits might not be evenly spread across the borough, particularly in Stanwell, where many residents already work at the airport.

The council says it will continue talks with HSR to ensure local voices are heard before any final decision. For now, the message from Spelthorne is clear: Heathrow's southern rail link is welcome — but not at the expense of Staines Moor or local control.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Photo: Train sign (Credit: Spelthorne Borough Council)

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Epsom Hospital braces for strikes amid winter pressures

13 November 2025



Further strike action by resident doctors - formerly known as junior doctors - is set to add strain to NHS services just as winter illnesses begin to rise. The British Medical Association (BMA) has confirmed walkouts from 7am on Friday 14 November until 7am on Wednesday 19 November in what will be the latest round of industrial action in a long-running dispute with the Government over pay and working conditions. Hundreds of medics across St George's, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group could join the five-day stoppage. The Trust says services are already under pressure from rising flu cases, which have climbed earlier than expected this year. Dr Richard Jennings, Group Chief Medical Officer, warned of disruption ahead and said hospitals are "always very busy at this time of year" and are experiencing "significant pressure" due to the combined impact of seasonal illness and the upcoming walkouts. He said consultant doctors and other staff will work extra shifts "to keep patients safe", but appointments may still need to be rescheduled to safeguard care for emergency and critically ill patients.

Local impact so far

During the previous round of resident-doctor strikes in July, 144 elective procedures and 1,084 outpatient appointments were rescheduled across the Group. On an average strike day, 211 resident doctors were recorded absent across the Trust's sites. The public will be contacted directly if their appointment needs to be rearranged, and the Trust emphasises that any appointment not specifically cancelled should be attended as normal. Emergency departments remain open for life-threatening conditions.

Why doctors say they are striking

The BMA has repeatedly argued that resident-doctor pay has been eroded by more than a quarter in real terms since 2008. Representatives say pay restoration is essential both to retain doctors within the NHS and to halt a pattern of experienced staff leaving for better-paid roles abroad. Doctors' leaders also say the dispute is about patient safety: they claim chronic understaffing means resident doctors are covering too many gaps in rotas, working excessive hours, and taking on responsibilities that stretch beyond their training. The BMA says that improving pay and working conditions would reduce burnout and stabilise the workforce, ultimately shortening waiting lists. The organisation has also expressed frustration that talks with Government have repeatedly stalled, arguing that below-inflation pay offers fall far short of resolving the dispute.

Government position

Ministers have previously said that the level of pay demanded by the BMA is unaffordable in the current economic climate and would divert funds from frontline services. The Government maintains that it has accepted independent pay review body recommendations and has urged doctors to return to negotiations without pre-conditions. Officials also argue that strike action adds further pressure to already stretched NHS services and risks longer delays for patients waiting for operations and specialist appointments.

Advice for patients this week

The Trust is urging the public to continue using NHS services responsibly. NHS 111 online should be the first port of call for non-emergencies, pharmacies can advise on minor illnesses, and GP services are unaffected by industrial action. With flu infections rising, eligible residents are being encouraged to get vaccinated without delay, and people are asked to check in on vulnerable friends and neighbours. Dr Jennings emphasised that anyone with a life-threatening condition must still attend A&E or call 999.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Primark finally indicates a season to open in Epsom

13 November 2025



The Ashley Centre in Epsom has confirmed that Primark is set to open its doors in Spring 2026, occupying a two-floor, 44,000 square foot retail unit. The arrival of this major fashion retailer is being billed as a milestone for the Centre and for the local retail offering in Epsom.

Background and delays

The unit which Primark will occupy has had a long and troubled history of vacancy. The previous occupier closed three years ago, leaving the large space empty ever since. Work to transform the unit was delayed when the first building contractors appointed to carry out the full refit went bust, setting the project back significantly. After these setbacks, the confirmation that Primark will finally open its Epsom store marks the end of a long wait for local shoppers and a major boost for the Ashley Centre.

The new Primark store

Primark will open next to fashion giant JD Sports and within easy reach of other major retailers such as NEXT, Marks & Spencer and Oliver Bonas. The store will span two floors and showcase the brand's extensive range of women's, men's and children's clothing, accessories and homeware. Its size and location will make it one of the key anchors within the shopping centre.

A boost for the town centre

Ashley Centre Assistant Manager Will Greenland said: "The opening of Primark is one of the most highly anticipated openings that Ashley Centre has had for quite some time, and we know just how much local shoppers are looking forward to it. Primark's arrival will not only bring a fantastic new retail offer to Epsom, but it will create new job opportunities, increase footfall, and further elevate the centre's role as a prime shopping destination in the community."

The store is expected to generate new employment, draw additional visitors from across Surrey, and strengthen the Centre's position as Epsom's prime shopping hub.

About Primark

Primark was founded in Dublin in 1969, trading as Penneys in Ireland, before expanding to the UK in the 1970s. It has since grown into one of the country's biggest clothing and homeware retailers, known for its affordable fashion and high turnover of seasonal collections. The company continues to rely on the appeal of physical stores rather than online sales, promoting what it describes as a lively, social shopping experience.

In recent years, the brand has invested in sustainability and responsible sourcing, aiming to improve transparency across its global supply chain. Despite broader challenges in the retail sector, Primark has consistently reported strong growth and remains a major draw for shopping centres across the UK.

Looking ahead

For Epsom, the long-awaited opening of Primark represents more than just another store. It brings one of Britain's best-known brands to the town centre, fills a large empty space, and sends a signal of renewed confidence in the local retail economy. Shoppers can expect a broad and affordable range of fashion and homeware when doors finally open in Spring 2026.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Leatherhead to be home to 500 Surrey Police Officers

13 November 2025



Surrey Police will get its new East Surrey headquarters after huge plans including hundreds of homes was approved. The force has been on the lookout for a new hub after its Reigate base was forced to close suddenly when dangerous crumbly RAAC concrete that can collapse without warning was found through the old site in 2023. The plans, on the former ERA site in Cleeve Road, Leatherhead, will be built in phases after being approved by Mole Valley District Council’s development committee on Wednesday, November 5.

The first work at the site will be to build a new strategic divisional police headquarters for Surrey Police with 500 officers and staff moving into the building. Stage two will see the existing redundant buildings demolished to make way for a residential block accommodating 40 affordable residential homes that the police said would ideally be for its own staff. Stage three would build out 185 new homes.

Despite being voted through without any formal objections, concerns were raised over the lack of affordable housing in the project and that the council’s affordability targets had been made a mockery. It was admitted that, in the current market, it was practically impossible for new developments to have 40 per cent of the new homes be affordable, and the project be financially viable.

Speaking on behalf of the force, a spokesperson said: “We needed to move out of our Reigate Headquarters in 2023 due to the discovery of RAAC. We are lucky enough to have secured temporary accommodation, but very much a temporary solution in the knowledge that we needed a long-term divisional headquarters.” He said Surrey Police settled on Leatherhead because its gave their teams “good access to the local area and the major road links so officers can fight crime and protect people in the area.”

Better facilities would allow the force to attract and retain staff. He added that while there will be serving officers operating from the base it would not act as a fire type response meaning that, while they could not guarantee there would never be sirens going off, it would be “highly unlikely.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

ERA Site, Cleeve Road, Leatherhead, Surrey (image Google)

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Free trees for Epsom and Ewell residents

13 November 2025



Surrey residents are being invited to collect free trees later this month, as part of Surrey County Council’s drive to plant 1.2 million trees by 2030 – one for every resident.

A total of 4,000 native trees will be given away at community recycling centres (CRCs) around the county, including Leatherhead – the nearest collection point for Epsom and Ewell.

The giveaway will run from 9am to 4pm on **Friday 28 November**, **Saturday 29 November**, and **Monday 1 December** at seven CRCs: Chertsey, Cranleigh, Dorking, Earlswood, Leatherhead, Shepperton and Witley.

The closest to Epsom and Ewell is Randalls Road, Leatherhead, KT22 0BA. Tel: 01372 375 479

Each visitor can collect one free small or medium-sized native tree, such as crab apple or hazel, along with aftercare guidance. Trees should be planted within seven days of collection.

To manage demand and avoid disappointment, advance booking is essential. Residents can reserve a date and location online through Surrey County Council’s website.

Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Environment, said: “Our tree giveaways are always popular events, so it’s really important that anyone wishing to attend books in advance. By collecting a free tree, you will be helping us with our ambition to facilitate the planting of 1.2 million trees, one for every

resident by 2030. Since our pledge in 2019, 768,332 trees have been planted and we couldn't have done this without the ongoing support from schools, communities, businesses and residents, and of course the volunteers who have helped with the planting itself."

She added: "Planting a tree in your garden not only helps us tackle the impact of climate change and improve biodiversity, but you will be part of a Surrey legacy."

Trees help ease the effects of climate change by storing carbon, preventing flooding, and improving air quality and biodiversity. The county council's Tree Strategy aims to ensure the "right tree is planted in the right place" and that young trees are properly cared for as they establish.

For more information or to book a collection slot, visit the Surrey County Council website or email trees@surreycc.gov.uk.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom Hospital braces for flu spike

13 November 2025



Hospitals serving Epsom, St Helier and St George's are warning of a potentially severe flu season as national data reveals the number of deaths linked to the virus in England more than doubled last winter.

Figures from the UK Health Security Agency show 7,757 flu-related deaths were recorded in 2024-25, compared with 3,555 the previous year. Child deaths rose from 34 to 53 — a 56 per cent increase — while fewer people took up the offer of a flu vaccination.

Last winter, local hospitals faced intense pressure from flu alongside RSV, Covid and norovirus outbreaks, which closed wards and stretched Emergency Departments to capacity. With flu cases now rising again after the school half-term, health leaders fear a repeat.

Chief Nursing Officer for St George's, Epsom and St Helier hospitals, Elaine Clancy, urged residents to act now. "Last flu season was particularly nasty and we're very concerned that this year could be even worse - we're preparing for a spike of flu onto our wards," she said. "We see people dying every year from flu and sadly thousands more will likely this year. I strongly recommend booking your jab now, as it takes up to 14 days to fully kick in."

Local mother Amy Clare, from Sutton, knows how dangerous flu can be. Her five-week-old son Jonah was rushed to Epsom Hospital's Emergency Department with the virus in December 2022.

"What started as a fever quickly escalated," said Amy. "When the doctor told us we'd be spending Christmas in hospital, I was devastated. But he was in the best place to get better. The care we received from the moment we walked into A&E was fantastic - the staff immediately knew something wasn't right and were with us every step of the way."

Jonah was discharged the day after Christmas but continued to receive daily treatment until the New Year. "The care Jonah received saved his life," said Amy.

Pregnant women are strongly advised to have the flu jab at any stage of pregnancy. It protects both mother and baby, but uptake remains low — only around one in three expectant mothers in England were vaccinated last year.

Those eligible for a free NHS flu vaccination include:

- everyone aged 65 and over
- people under 65 with long-term health conditions such as diabetes or heart problems
- children aged two and three, and all primary school children
- some secondary school pupils (Years 7 to 11)
- residents in care homes
- carers and those receiving carer's allowance
- people living with someone who has a weakened immune system
- frontline health and social care workers

People can book or amend their flu vaccination appointment online: [Book, change or cancel a free NHS flu vaccination at a pharmacy - NHS](#).

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey resident's views on County split ignored?

13 November 2025



The Government has been accused of ignoring Surrey residents’ views on how to dissolve and merge the county’s councils after it emerged there was a clear preference for three unitaries rather than the two mega authorities that have been imposed.

A consultation ran from June 17 to August 5 to help the Government understand what residents, businesses, and other stakeholders thought about the changes in Surrey. The results, we were told, would be used to “inform the final decision on which option is best for Surrey, with a decision expected in October.”

On Tuesday, October 28, it was announced that Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts would be abolished and replaced with West Surrey Council and East Surrey Council. The decision flies in the face of the 51 per cent of the 5,617 respondents who backed three unitary proposals versus the 19 per cent that favoured East/West.

This, despite a costly PR drive from Surrey County Council that sent leaflets to every household pushing for the two unitaries. The results were published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as part of its decision – and found that, in addition to the strong resident support for three councils, 56 per cent were also strongly opposed to what has been delivered.

The Ministry said: “Support for the three unitary proposal was based on the view that a three unitary council model resulted in authorities that were a good size and that the groupings of current authority areas made sense. Residents generally believed that the proposal would achieve good economies and efficiencies and be good for local identity, accountability, community engagement and service improvement.

“Negative responses relating to the three unitary proposal highlighted concern that it would not generate significant efficiencies, as well as concerns about how debt would be addressed. Those who supported the two unitary proposal typically did so on the basis of the greater efficiencies presented in the proposal, with the belief that it would create authorities of a good size.

“It added: “There was no single factor as to why residents did not support the two unitary proposal, though the most common theme in responses was that the two unitaries were too large and secondly, that the proposals would be bad for local identity.”

Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the Liberal Democrats on Surrey County Council, was one of the drivers behind the three unitary model in his role as leader of Waverley Borough Council. He said: “They cancelled elections, asked for views, and then did the opposite.”

The Ministry said its decision process carefully considered responses to the consultation as well as all other relevant information. It said the proposals were assessed against set criteria and that, of the choices, the two-council proposal better met that – particularly as it is seen as more likely to be financially sustainable.

A spokesperson said: “Putting Surrey’s local authorities on a more sustainable footing is vital to safeguarding the services its residents rely on, as well as investing in their futures. The government consultation for both proposals, held between July 17 and August 5, treated the proposals equally.”

On the cancelled elections, the ministry said they were postponed for a year to provide additional capacity for speeding up reorganisation – given the urgency of creating sustainable unitary local government for Surrey.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

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Image: Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (image Google)

Government Casts Doubt on Surrey’s Mayoral Devolution Promise

13 November 2025



No promises have been made that Surrey will get full devolution and a directly elected mayor – despite it being the “entire purpose” of the lengthy and arduous process of splitting the historic county and its 11 boroughs and districts into two mega councils.

It had been understood that Surrey’s councils would be abolished and reformed into either two or three unitary authorities, with two sets of elections – first for the new bodies, and then for an overarching mayor in 2027. Surrey County Council’s website outlining the devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process mentions the word “Mayor” seven times, and even lists May 2027 as when residents would go to the polls to decide who would be responsible for strategic services such as education, policing, fire and rescue.

However, the Government’s own timetable for Surrey only lists a May 2026 election for the two shadow councils, followed by the next round of balloting in May 2031 – and then every four years after that. Furthermore, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has said that the references to Surrey getting a directly elected mayor were “not quite accurate” as the decision “has not been confirmed” and that they were only “committed to working with partners to establish a strategic authority for the area”. They clarified that the announcement that Surrey would be dissolved and reformed into East and West Surrey was

“not promising a mayor”.

Areas with strategic mayors, such as London and Manchester, are given extra devolved powers from Government, with the argument being it gives local people a greater say in the running of their areas. Writing to the leaders of Surrey’s councils, the ministry would only say that simplifying local government ensures “a strong foundation for devolution”. It said it was committed to working with partners across Surrey, including the new unitary authorities, to establish a strategic authority to ensure relevant functions held at the county level can continue on that geographic footprint where possible, such as transport and adult skills.

It added that the establishment of a strategic authority would be subject to the relevant statutory tests being met and local consent – but makes no mention of a directly elected mayor. This is important because strategic authorities are different from Mayoral Strategic Authorities. According to the ministry, Foundation Strategic Authorities include non-mayoral combined authorities and combined county authorities, and any local authority designated as a strategic authority without a mayor.

Mayoral Strategic Authorities, such as the Greater London Authority, all Mayoral Combined Authorities and all Mayoral Combined County Authorities, “automatically begin as Mayoral Strategic Authorities” – and only those that meet specified eligibility criteria may be designated as Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities to unlock further devolution.

It has left the county council saying devolution is now an “ambition” rather than a formality. Others have called out the council for rushing into such a seismic shift, and cancelling elections to get devolution done – without any guarantees over whether the county would get a mayor.

Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the Liberal Democrat group at Surrey County Council, said having a mayor “was the entire purpose of the reorganisation”. He added: “The county council has gone in on this nonsense without any guarantee over the reason they have it, despite that being the principal reason the county has initiated this process – but they have yet to receive any guarantees. I’m sure the county will reflect their reasons for going for this in the light that the ministry said we may not be getting devolution.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Image: Tim Oliver (credit Surrey Live) and County graphic (credit SCC).

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Surrey prison drug smuggling drones might be investigated

13 November 2025



Drones smuggling drugs into prison will be investigated in an inquest into a man who died in custody. The full inquest, which opens next month, will also look at his care and supervision.

Oliver Mulangala, 40, was found dead at HMP High Down, Sutton in July 2024. A pre-inquest review was held at Woking’s Coroner’s Court on October 29, ahead of a 10-week inquest due to begin on November 17.

At the hearing, Coroner Jonathan Stevens said it was his role to investigate any potential factors contributing to Mr Mulangala’s death, including the possibility that drugs may have entered the prison by drones. However, Ministry of Justice (MoJ) representative Mr Simms said there was no evidence to suggest the substances consumed by Mr Mulangala were delivered by drone.

He warned releasing details of intelligence related to drone activity in prison, and measures to reduce or minimise drones, could risk compromising the prison’s security. Mr Simms said the MoJ’s decision had “not been taken lightly” but said “it was not in the public interest” to provide this information.

Barrister Michael Etienne, acting on behalf of Mr Mulangala’s family at the coroner’s court in Woking, said the family wanted the inquest to look at the monitoring, care and supervision in the 12 months prior to Oliver’s tragic death. The court heard that the prison officer who failed to conduct the roll call the morning of July 13 was subsequently dismissed. When Mr Mulangala was found by officers, they undertook initial life support.

Coroner Stevens asked to see all the evidence available from family statements, the MoJ and NHS trust, before deciding if it is relevant for the full inquest. A full inquest with a jury is due to take place for two weeks from November 17. Numerous witnesses will be called, including senior figures from HMP High Down, current prisoners and those responsible for Mr Mulangala’s health.

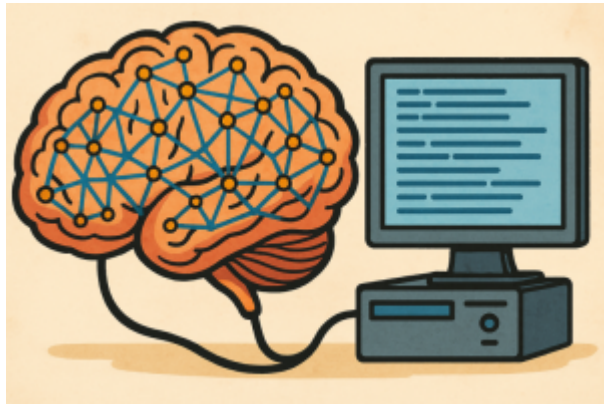
The Ministry of Justice and North West London NHS Trust have been identified as interested persons in the inquest.

Emily Dalton LDRS

[HMP High Down from Google maps](#)

Surrey Uni show AI systems based on the human brain’s save energy

13 November 2025



Artificial intelligence (AI) could soon become more energy-efficient and faster, thanks to a new approach developed at the University of Surrey that takes direct inspiration from biological neural networks of the human brain.

In a study published in Neurocomputing, researchers from Surrey’s Nature-Inspired Computation and Engineering (NICE) group have shown that mimicking the brain’s sparse and structured neural wiring can significantly improve the performance of artificial neural networks (ANNs) – used in generative AI and other modern AI models such as ChatGPT – without sacrificing accuracy.

The method, called Topographical Sparse Mapping (TSM), rethinks how AI systems are wired at their most fundamental level. Unlike conventional deep-learning models – such as those used for image recognition and language processing – which connect every neuron in one layer to all neurons in the next, wasting energy, TSM connects each neuron only to nearby or related ones, much like how the brain’s visual system organises information efficiently. Through this natural design, the model eliminates the need for vast numbers of unnecessary connections and computations.

An enhanced version, called Enhanced Topographical Sparse Mapping (ETSM), goes a step further by introducing a biologically inspired “pruning” process during training – similar to how the brain gradually refines its neural connections as it learns. Together, these approaches allow AI systems to achieve equal or even greater accuracy while using only a fraction of the parameters and energy required by conventional models.

Dr Roman Bauer, Senior Lecturer at the University of Surrey’s School of Computer Science and Electronic Engineering, and project supervisor, said:

“Training many of today’s popular large AI models can consume over a million kilowatt-hours of electricity, which is equivalent to the annual use of more than a hundred US homes, and cost tens of millions of dollars. That simply isn’t sustainable at the rate AI continues to grow. Our work shows that intelligent systems can be built far more efficiently, cutting energy demands without sacrificing performance.”

Surrey’s enhanced model achieved up to 99% sparsity – meaning it could remove almost all of the usual neural connections – but still matched or exceeded the accuracy of standard networks on benchmark datasets. Because it avoids the constant fine-tuning and rewiring used by other approaches, it trains faster, uses less memory and consumes less than one per cent of the energy of a conventional AI system.

Mohsen Kamelian Rad, a PhD student at the University of Surrey and lead author of the study, said:

“The brain achieves remarkable efficiency through its structure, with each neuron forming connections that are spatially well-organised. When we mirror this topographical design, we can train AI systems that learn faster, use less energy and perform just as accurately. It’s a new way of thinking about neural networks, built on the same biological principles that make natural intelligence so effective”

While the current framework applies the brain-inspired mapping to an AI model’s input layer, extending it to deeper layers could make networks even leaner and more efficient. The research team is also exploring how the approach could be used in other applications, such as more realistic neuromorphic computers, where the efficiency gains could have an even greater impact.

Surrey University



Epsom and Ewell Times asked ChatGPT to explain the above press release from Surrey University and this is what it wrote:

“Artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT rely on vast numbers of digital connections between “neurons”, mimicking how the human brain works – but they use enormous amounts of electricity to do it. Researchers at the University of Surrey have developed a new way to wire these networks that could make them dramatically more efficient.

Instead of connecting every artificial neuron to every other, the Surrey team copied the brain’s habit of linking only nearby or related neurons. Their method, called **Topographical Sparse Mapping**, cuts out unnecessary connections, saving energy while maintaining accuracy. A refined version, **Enhanced Topographical Sparse Mapping**, even “prunes” the network during learning – like the brain trimming unused connections as it develops. The result is AI that can train faster, use less memory and consume less than one per cent of the energy of current systems.

If this approach proves scalable, it could mean greener, cheaper and quicker AI – taking inspiration not from bigger computers, but from the extraordinary efficiency of the human brain.”