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East Surrey not going as green as the Greens want

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East Surrey Council did not pass a motion declaring a climate emergency – including a commitment to decarbonise by 2030 – following a spirited debate over costs and the pace of action.

At a meeting of the full shadow council this week, Councillor Jonathan Essex (Green Party: Redhill East & North Earlswood) put forward a motion that would see the new council commit to ambitious climate targets.

Surrey County Council – which will be abolished next year and replaced with the new West and East Surrey Councils – declared a climate emergency in 2019 amid a wave of local authorities issuing similar statements.

Councillor Essex's motion called on East Surrey to "meet or exceed" the current climate targets and for the council itself to achieve net zero emissions by 2030 – along with a 2050 target for the area as a whole.

It also calls for a cross-party working group to be set up after East Surrey assumes local government power in April 2027, which would review ongoing climate actions against their targets.

Councillor Essex said: "The climate science is now unequivocal. It has stared us in the face all summer. Five heat waves. The hottest UK summer on record."

"We must reclaim hope in the space between a now locked-in brutal future of increasing disasters and the now slim possibility of avoiding something far darker and apocalyptic."

He added that "a step change by governments, local and national" is needed to address the challenge.

But while there was broad acknowledgment of the threats posed by climate change among councillors, a debate ensued over the costs of implementing these targets.

Councillor Andy Burton (Liberal Democrats: Esher, Claygate & Oxshott North) praised Councillor Essex for putting forward an "important motion raising a critical topic".

He said: "I agree, we are in a climate crisis. We now must look at climate resilience and adaptation measures as well as mitigation and net zero targets."

However, he was among the voices raising concerns over the cost of pursuing the targets outlined in the motion.

"As we don't know either the cost of this commitment – or the affordability of it – I don't think we can give this current commitment now," he said.

"However, it is a commitment I would like to be able to give. So I fully support, wholeheartedly, the second limb of this motion [that called for a working group to analyse climate targets]."

His comments were echoed by opposition leader Councillor David Lewis (Conservative: Cobham & Oxshott South), who further pointed to Surrey County Council's progress in meeting emissions targets since the 2019 climate emergency declaration.

Councillor Lewis said: "While we all recognise the risks posed by climate change, we must ensure that the actions we commit to are affordable, achievable and evidence-led."

Other councillors spoke out against the motion to argue it did not go far enough in pursuing action on climate change.

Councillor Claire Malcomson (Liberal Democrats: Dorking Hills) said: "Why simply repeat a declaration? It's weak.

"The creation of East Surrey Council gives us a unique opportunity to start afresh – to do something stronger, to mitigate climate change, adapt to what is already happening and build resilience."

But other members of the council blasted the broad hesitancy to back the motion, with some saying that investment in climate mitigation measures would save money in the long term.

Councillor Jeremy Pursehouse (Independent: Warlingham) said: "We have run out of time, we haven't got it anymore.

"Yes, some things are going to cost a bit more to do it the right way, but experience shows us that those actually save us money in the long run."

The motion's preamble noted the Met Office's provisional report that warned summer 2026 was the hottest on record – during which time vast swathes of England were placed into drought.

Surrey's Climate Change Strategy from 2020 sets out the outgoing council's intention for the county to achieve carbon neutrality in time for the national deadline of 2050.

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Councillor Nick Greenfield (Reform UK: Lingfield) commented: “This is a very passionate subject for everybody, and the quality of the debate has been great.

“I really do think that unless we have proper costings – and a more concrete proposal – we can’t vote positively today for this motion.”

But wrapping up the debate, Councillor Stephen McKenna (Green Party: Redhill East & North Earlswood) said: “Acting now is cheaper than paying for the consequences later.”

Despite broad statements of support for climate action from councillors, the motion was ultimately defeated, with 40 of the council’s 72 members voting it down.

While some councillors opposing the first part of the text calling for ambitious climate targets were more supportive of the second part backing a working group on the topic, the motion had to be voted on as a whole.

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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