Surrey Borough running ahead on bio-fuel

The first Surrey council to switch its entire vehicle fleet from diesel to waste fats and cooking oil said the move could cut emissions by about 90 per cent. **Runnymede Borough Council** said the decision, unanimously approved by its environment and sustainability committee last week, will stop about 650 tonnes of C02 from being released into the air each year.

The shift to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) is expected to take place over the coming months as about 80 of the council's refuse trucks, minibuses, vans, street sweepers and other vehicles make the switch.

It makes Runnymede Borough Council the first in Surrey to go all in on HVO with the change expected to make greater inroads into reducing the council's operational carbon emissions than any other initiative explored to date.

Details on how much it will cost have been kept private and confidential but the day-to-day operating costs of moving over to HVO are expected to be higher than with diesel, the council confirmed, but said it had set aside an additional £100,000 to cover fuel costs.

A statement issued by the council said it demonstrated the desire "across all parties to make an effective and lasting positive impact on Runnymede's climate and environment".

Committee chair Councillor **David Coen**, said: "It is great to know that in the coming months our fleet, from our bin lorries to our road sweepers, will continue to provide the same high level of service whilst producing less harmful pollution into the environment and people's lungs.

"We've committed that by 2030 all our council operations will be carbon net zero. Switching over to HVO has the potential of hugely reducing the council's overall carbon emission."

HVO can be used with the council's existing fleet without the need for engine modifications or new machinery.

Cllr **Don Whyte**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group and member of the environment and sustainability committee added: "It's a positive move. Runnymede is very late coming to the climate crisis declaration. This is a small step, but it's an important thing."

Should we be going to....?

The Specsavers Surrey Youth Games is back. Following on from the success of the games last year, a wide range of activities are available in **Epsom & Ewell** again, including tennis, judo, swimming and more. The Games are the largest multi-sport youth programme of their kind in the South East, offering **free** local training for 7-16 year olds across Surrey, leading to a final celebratory event for the whole family.

The Games are ideal for beginners who may not get the opportunity to attend clubs or are put off by the thought of competing against others. Supportive coaches will help participants join in, have fun, learn new skills, and boost their confidence.

Registration is now open for the free training sessions which start after Easter and are aimed at those who live or go to school in the borough. Following the training, teams can unite for a family-friendly event at the Surrey Sports Park in Guildford on Saturday 15 June.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee, said "I'm so pleased that we are running the Specsavers Surrey Youth Games in Epsom & Ewell again this year. The initiative provides a fantastic opportunity for young people who are still building their confidence in sport to access training free of charge.

"I hope that everyone in our borough will take a look at what's on offer and even tell friends and family about the initiative, so that we can ensure that as many children as possible can access the training."

You can find out what's on offer in the Epsom & Ewell borough and register for a place by visiting www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/syg

Better private - public health communications could prevent deaths

A young woman tragically took her own life in Surrey prompting a warning from a coroner over communication barriers between hospitals. Meghan Chrismas, who suffered from anxiety disorder, depression, complex PTSD and ADHD, died by suicide on October 20, 2021 at a Premier Inn in Guildford.

Less than three weeks prior, Meghan had impulsively attempted suicide by overdose and was admitted to Royal Surrey Hospital on the following day. She was offered further psychiatric treatment through the NHS at this time, which she declined in favour of continuing with her private treatments at The Priory Hospital. Information about Meghan Chrismas' attempted overdose was only sent to her GP and not her private psychiatrist.

Meghan took her own life the same day as her private psychiatrist said she was "progressing well". Following Meghan's inquest Coroner Darren Stewart OBE wrote in a Prevention of Future Deaths report to NHS England over the 'concerning' communication barriers between private and public healthcare services.

He wrote: "At a time where pressures on the NHS exist, particularly for mental health services, it is of concern that measures which could alleviate this pressure (where someone sources private care) do not exist. There is little or no policy, guidance or other effective arrangements to share important clinical information about patients between private and public healthcare sectors."

"The passage of information between NHS and private healthcare providers is hindered due to the absence of an adequate structure to share important clinical information about patients in a timely and effective manner. Action should be taken to prevent future deaths."

Meghan was prescribed antidepressants after a face-to-face appointment with her GP in February 2021. She started seeing a private psychiatrist around July, and received prescriptions both privately and from her GP.

The coroner also raised this as a key concern. They wrote: "This means Mrs. Chrismas had access to double prescriptions. Healthcare professionals treating Mrs. Chrismas placed significant reliance on the perception that she would be open and honest in her communication with them."

The coroner also raised concerns around police forces communication between each other. It was at, 4.54pm that Meghan contacted Surrey Police to explain that she was fine. At 5.18pm, the call handler in the Hampshire Police control room communicated with Surrey Police only via email.

After receiving no response from Surrey Police, the handler in the Hampshire Police control room communicated with them via telephone Surrey Police then attended the location in Guildford and found Meghan's room barricaded. Upon gaining access to the room, officers found that Meghan had sadly died.

Officers attempted to resuscitate Meghan and her heartbeat restarted. After resuscitation, Meghan was transported to Royal Surrey County Hospital where she died two days later on October 20, 2021 from a Hypoxic Brain Injury.

The coroner wrote: "The handling of the incident involving Mrs. Chrismas in Hampshire Constabulary's Force Control Room which resulted in a hour delay in determining that an important communication (being a request for assistance) had not been received by a neighbouring force." It was not concluded however that this shortcoming contributed to her death.

Hampshire Constabulary have since said they have made significant improvements to their process. These measures included: Revision of training provided and the introduction of additional training for supervisors and control room staff. Implementation of National Policy concerning Missing Persons, including documentation to assist in control room responses to similar circumstances. Revision of the recording of risk assessment measurements on the computer aided dispatch record (CAD) system.

It was further explained to the court that the measures should be seen in the context of wider cultural change management in the supervision and leadership being undertaken by Hampshire Constabulary in the operation of the Control Room.

A spokesperson for Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust said: "Following Meghan's death an amendment was made to our Psychiatric Liaison Service policy stating discharge letters will be sent not just to the GP, but also to any other relevant external professional – provided we have the explicit consent of the individual to do this. The measure was welcomed by the Coroner."

SABP added it has developed new quidelines for both community and in-patient clinicians to ensure it routinely and actively seeks

a person's consent to contact and share information with or from their private practitioner.

The Priory Hospital did not make an additional comment. NHS England has been approached for comment.

Soni of Stagecoach Epsom lands lead role

Vishal Soni student of Stagecoach Performing Arts in **Epsom** landed the lead role in the National Theatre's musical production of Roald Dahl's **The Witches**.

Vishal fought off strong competition in auditions to land the role of Luke in a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale. In the original the boy at the centre of the story is unnamed. "Luke" follows the 1990 film version which gave the boy the name.

Performing on stage at the National Theatre for the 11-week production, Vishal shone in his remarkable portrayal of the courageous young protagonist.

The Witches is a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale, filled with wit, daring and heart. The Witches have come up with their most evil plan yet, and the only thing standing in their way is Luke and his Gran.

Vishal has been a student of Stagecoach Performing Arts in Epsom for nine years and has an impressive resume under his belt, including standout performances in The Sound of Music at Chichester, a UK tour of Les Misérables, and The Prince of Egypt in London's West End.

His upcoming role in the 2024 film adaptation of musical, Wicked, is a testament to his unwavering passion and undeniable talent.

Commenting Rachel Crouch, Principal of Stagecoach Epsom, said: "I've always been immensely proud of Vishal. Not only has he gone from job to job, but he has done so with such a professional and humble attitude. He's an absolute star and we couldn't be prouder. Thank you also to HF Management, his fabulous agents."

The Witches run at the National Theatre has now closed. Wicked is due to be released later this year.

Vishal in the production at the National Theatre. Photo credit: Marc Brenner

Fire Assembly for Ukraine

Saturday 10th March a Bronto Fire Engine came to Epsom's Market Square outside the Assembly Rooms. A crowd gathered to admire the magnificent machine and wish it well on its journey to a city near the front-line of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Roy Deadman of the charity **Surrey Stands With Ukraine** explained: "Some population centres in Ukraine are so close to the Russian artillery that the missiles can strike before the sirens sound. This fire engine with its long-ladder can rescue lives trapped in apartment blocks."

Another volunteer with the charity **Nick Budd** said "There has been a tremendous effort to raise the money to purchase this vehicle and the public have been very generous. Our partners in Ukraine are very grateful to be receiving this vital equipment."

The Mayor of Epsom and Ewell **Robert Geleit** (Labour, Court Ward) was in attendance, confirming a moment of pride for Epsom and Ewell as the headquarters for the humanitarian efforts of SSWU.

Charity director **Lionel Blackman** said: "Post Brexit there remain various bureaucratic obstacles to the engine's transportation across Europe to the Polish border, where our Ukrainian partners will collect and take through their country to where it is most needed; but we will overcome and we expect it to be in place in a few weeks from now."

It's not a fair cop? Cllr. Coley on police funding

Did you know that Surrey is the only police area in the country where local residents pay more towards policing than central government? The share of the burden is 55% Council Tax precept, versus 45% government funding.

The average Council Tax precept contribution in England and Wales is 34% and is growing faster than any other funding area. Government capital funding and funding for national priorities like serious violence is decreasing. From March 2016 to March 2024 the Council Tax precept nationally has increased by a total percentage of 71%. While government funding from March 2016 to March 2024 has only increased by 29%.

We are approaching a point where other police areas will join Surrey and cross the line where the Council Tax precept provides the majority of funding. Within three years a third of police areas may cross that point, in five years it could be half. Not only are residents being taxed twice for policing, many will soon face being directly taxed for the majority of police funding contributions where they live, just like in Surrey.

A quiet and gradual funding shift by stealth. We may find ourselves experiencing American style policing, where your local police are exclusively bought as a service paid for with a property tax. You only have to look at what happened in some US towns and cities when wealthy people moved out and funding collapsed. Criminal gangs move in sensing weakness and create a cycle of deprivation and self-reinforcing criminality driven by ever decreasing budgets that deter investment and prosperity. I am determined we don't end up like that and the government provides fairer funding.

At a meeting of the Surrey Police & Crime Panel we were asked to vote on the Police & Crime Commissioner's maximum increase to the precept. I asked her to consider other funding sources because of the impact of yet another maximum increase on residents suffering from the cost-of-living crisis after years of austerity. She had her staff answer for her: "What do you want us to do, pass a hat around?"

The Police & Crime Commissioner has £43m in treasury management, she underspent by £8.7m last year and is forecast to underspend again this year. Your Council tax is going into her reserves, while police officers are taken off the streets to cover desk jobs for staff vacancies. Little wonder that the recent inspection report assessed Surrey Police as 'Inadequate' at responding to the public.

I am petitioning parliament to change the police funding allocation formula so council taxpayers don't contribute more to their police force than government.

Please sign the petition here: alexcoley.uk/petition

"Bonkers but essential" job to cut back jobs?

'Bonkers but essential' is how a new £75,000 job, running bankrupt Woking Borough Council's decimated leisure and communities services is being described.

Last month, the council cut more than £8million from its budget; slashing spending on daycare centres, Citizens Advice Woking, and telling Pool in the Park to become self-sustaining or risk closure.

Now, it is advertising a new Head of Leisure and Communities to oversee the service and, on top a basic salary of between £65,624 and £76,439 a year, includes a £3,255 'flexible benefits allowance".

The advert, which runs until March 24, is seeking somebody to lead on the "commissioning, oversight and delivery of a range of leisure and community services, ensuring the facilities are operated in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way."

The successful candidate will be in charge of leisure contracts, sports and leisure services, arts and culture, community centres, and community safety.

A spokesperson for Woking Borough Council described the role as "a permanent position" adding that it was "essential to ensuring these services can move to a self-financing position through strong and effective partnerships, including managing the Council's leisure contract."

The outgoing postholder played a key role in making it possible for the borough to retain as many of the services it has, in the face of the necessary swinging cuts needed to balance its books. Leader of the opposition, Councillor Kevin Davies said:

"Ultimately you can argue that it s a non-statutory service, but the residents of Woking have made it extremely clear that they see it differently.

"On the face of it, the high value of the role is galling particularly as people have been made redundant but the (post holder) will be responsible for a lot of services that people hold dear.

"Will the council come across as tone deaf? Of course, but the residents want these services as at the end of the day.

"It looks bonkers, but it's to protect something that people see as absolutely valuable. We need a really good person and the incumbent has done a really good job in protecting as many of the services we could - without him we'd have lost Pool in the Park."

He added that the service would soon become a "shadow of its former self" with the council delivering the minimum is could get away with, for the maximum tax. He said: "Before it was trying to do the opposite, the real answer should be somewhere in the middle.

Among the role's duties will be working with both public and private sector partners to develop a "healthy, inclusive and engaged community" and to drive new initiatives that support residents as well as commissioning and contract management.

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Woking's debt crisis explained

Surrey County Council workers to strike?

Staff at Surrey County Council could walk out after a "record number" of people backed strike action - unless the authority makes a significantly improved pay offer, unions have said.

For the last two years the workers at the council have been offered less than the National Joint Council (NJC) pay award and less than most other neighbouring councils, according to Unison.

Those working in local government and schools have their pay and other conditions are negotiated by the NJC. The Local Democracy Reporting Service understands that those offers were rejected.

Last year, turnout for a full-strike ballot fell 40 votes short of the threshold required for legal industrial action, and the pay settlement imposed without agreement.

This year, a consultative ballot of members, covering core Surrey County Council workers and support staff in Surrey maintained schools, concluded on Friday, March 1, and achieved enough votes with a 53 per cent turnout - with 87 per cent of members rejecting the 4 per cent average pay offer, and 91 per cent of those voting for strike action, record in Surrey.

Union representatives are due to meet next week and have said that unless staff receive a "significantly improved offer" they will "be recommending a vote for a full legal industrial action ballot over the next few weeks".

Paul Couchman, branch secretary of Surrey Unison, said: "Our members are more frustrated and more angry than they have ever been. Voting over 90 per cent for potential strike action is unprecedented in Surrey. We hope the council will see the strength of feeling of their staff and reconsider their offer.

"If there is no significantly improved offer from the council in the next few days we will have no choice other than to go to a formal ballot for strike action, where we are confident our members will once again respond positively to a call for action."

It comes as the county council's new £30 million payroll system was reported to have left staff "wiping tears of frustration and helplessness" over missed payments.

The council brought in a new Enterprise Resource Planning system last June and said it had "experienced some issues relating to payroll" and that it had been working to improve the system but given its complexity, needed an ongoing programme of software upgrades and fixes to address issues that have arisen.

Mr Couchman added: "No doubt the anger and frustration over the payroll issues has added to the general cost of living crisis, making Surrey County Council employees vote in unprecedentedly high numbers for strike action."

A spokesperson for Surrey said: "We are still in talks with the Trade Unions regarding the 2024/25 pay offer therefore it would be inappropriate to comment while these discussions are still ongoing."

Related reports:

Computer lets down County Council workers

Varying opinions on local maternity services

Epsom and St Helier Hospital NHS Trust claims it has a 'strong' maternity service despite failings in a recent CQC report. Safety in the maternity service was rated 'inadequate' in a report published by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in February. The service overall was downgraded from 'good' to 'requires improvement'.

Managing Director of the Trust **James Blythe** said, at an Epsom and Ewell Health Liaison Panel on March 3, he was "disappointed" with the CQC report. He added: "The hospital has a really strong service and what the CQC identified are processes we need to get stronger at."

However, the CQC's report highlights practical issues including qualifications and competence of staff, and an environment 'not fit for purpose'.

An update report by the Trust given to the Epsom and Ewell Health Liaison Panel said: "All of our maternity services meet 10 out of the 10 safety actions required nationally." The 10 safety actions are specific to maternity services and range from submitting maternity data, workforce planning, training and action plans, to delivering best practice.

However, the CQC report found the leadership team 'did not take timely action' to make change where non-compliance with four safety actions was identified in the 2022/23 inspection.

A report in July 2022 identified a shortfall of midwives, yet this had still not been addressed in January 2023. The service was therefore unable to declare compliance with safety action 5 on midwifery workforce planning.

The CQC report said: "On inspection, there was a lack of clarity from managers and leaders about whether the service was on track to make improvements and declare compliance for 2023/24."

Epsom and St Helier hospital Trust were asked about the discrepancy between the agenda stating they met all 10 safety actions and the CQC inspection report outlying non-compliance of safety actions. The Trust did not comment on the difference.

The Trust is planning to invest more than £2m over two years to increase midwifery staffing in the unit by 8% so the Trust can declare full compliance with safety action 5.

Visiting the hospital in August 2023, the CQC found the service "did not have enough midwifery and nursing staff in the right areas with the right qualifications, skills and training to care for women, birthing [partners] and babies".

Staff working in transitional care for babies who require extra support "did not have the qualifications and competence for the role they were undertaking."

A spokesperson from Epsom and St Helier said: "Our priority is to ensure women and birthing people receive the best possible care, and we have already taken steps to improve and strengthen our maternity services – rated by mums in the CQC's own survey as the best in London."

Days before the inspection report was published, the Trust secured a strong result in a CQC patient experience survey of women and birthing partner's experiences of maternity care in England.

Maternity services at Epsom and St Helier received the best scores in London, with maternity care at St George's joint second place.

The environment in some areas was 'not fit for purpose', and on the maternity ward this posed an 'infection prevention and control risk'. Bereavement and recovery facilities did not meet national standards for privacy.

The Trust is said it is 'fast-tracking' estates work with new doors and blinds fitted to improve privacy and dignity.

The hospital's environment was "not fit for purpose in all areas" and the facilities and equipment were found to "not always keep people safe".

An Epsom and St Helier spokesperson implied that patients deserve better than the current crumbling estate – but the hospital can still deliver and receive safe care.

Founded in 1938, approximately 90% of St Helier Hospital pre-dates the NHS itself. A further 98% of the St Helier estate is said to be either in very poor or bad condition and requires capital investment or replacement.

Millions are said to be invested every year to address the most urgent estate challenges, while also improving the buildings, facilities, equipment and environment for patients and staff.

A spokesperson for Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust said: "This new rating is partly a reflection of our ageing estate, and - while the care they receive is safe - mums, babies and other patients deserve better, which is why we're pleased the Government has promised us a new hospital and upgrades to our existing facilities by 2030."

Civic awards at civic reception

The Epsom and Ewell Mayor's civic reception took place at Bourne Hall, Ewell on Friday 8th March. The "great and the good" of the Borough, including Member of Parliament **Chris Grayling**, gathered at this special annual event that witnessed the conferment of the title of Alderman of Epsom and Ewell to three long-serving local councillors.



The ceremonies began with the Mayor's Active Citizen Award. The Mayor, Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court Ward), presented this year's award to **Barbara Lewis**, praising her selfless dedication to the community: "Barbara, born in Kingston, was instilled with a strong sense of altruism by her late mother. After attending Tiffin Girls Grammar School and serving in the civil service, Barbara settled in Ewell with her husband Martin, celebrating their upcoming Golden Wedding Anniversary. Barbara's commitment to her local area, Station Avenue, has been unwavering. Notably, she spearheaded efforts to provide scrubs, masks, and other essentials to frontline workers during the pandemic, and organized a heartwarming visit from Santa for children in her neighborhood. Barbara's involvement extends to various charitable endeavors, including Epsom Twinning Society and Epsom Rotary Club, and she even finds time to teach a Spanish class for the University of Third Age (U3A). Additionally, Barbara has dedicated herself to fundraising, notably supporting the Mayor's Charity Committee. Her generosity knows no bounds, always willing to help and support her community."



Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh), spoke up for **Chris Frost**, and welcomed him as an Honorary Alderman of Epsom and Ewell, recognizing his positive impact on local politics: "Chris's journey in politics began in his youth, and his dedication led to his election to the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and later the Surrey County Council. Known for his community spirit, Chris spearheaded initiatives like the Interfaith Forum and the Epsom and Ewell Community Fund."

Ms Dalton commended Chris's wife, Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley), for her unwavering support and thanked his family for their presence. She expressed gratitude to all who supported Chris over the years, including council officers.



Eber Kington signs the book with Mayor and EEBC CEO Jackie King looking on.

Cllr **Peter O'Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) reflected on **Eber Kington**'s remarkable career, celebrating his induction as an Honorary Alderman: "Born in Battersea, Eber's journey into local politics began in the 80s when he joined the Woodcote Residents' Association, eventually becoming a respected councillor. Eber's tenure was marked by his commitment to his constituents, often being the first point of contact for residents' concerns. Despite his aversion to planning matters, Eber's dedication to his community was unwavering. His tenure as Mayor in 1999 was memorable, highlighted by his unconventional but effective leadership style. Eber's dedication to community service extends beyond politics, evident in his charity work and love for Chelsea Football Club." Mr O'Donovan praised Eber's integrity, noting his willingness to listen and support fellow councillors.





Finally, Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) spoke emotionally in praise of the late Mr **Clive Smitheram** who was awarded the Honour of Alderman of the Borough of Epsom and Ewell posthumously. Clive was a central figure in West Ewell having lived there for over 30 years with his wife Gill and family and although a proud Cornishman, Clive was someone who knew everyone locally and if he didn't know someone, he knew someone who did! Clive was a former police officer, having served 31 years in the service and was a retired community safety officer. As an active resident, it led to Clive being elected as a Resident Association Councillor for West Ewell serving for over 20 years, Clive was a former Mayor of Epsom and Ewell in 2010- 2011.

Mrs Smitheram receives the honour on behalf of the late Clive Smitheram.

All photos below heading courtesy Steven McCormick Photography

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