Dorking Halls to shut again for restoration?

One of Surrey's "largest and most comprehensive arts and performance" spaces could shut its doors again if the next phase of its near £10m revamp is approved. Dorking Halls closed last year as Mole Valley District Council agreed to fund £6.1m in "sorely needed" repairs and refurbishments to avoid safety risks and any unscheduled problems. It later became clear the original scope and scale of the issues had been underestimated and that work would take longer and cost more than first forecast. This has been made worse by rises in material prices and market rates over the past year, the council said. Hoped-for grant funding through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme has also stopped being available.

Mole Valley District Council is now seeking an extra £3.34m of upgrade works to replace outdated air handling units and chillers, cut annual carbon emissions by 75 tonnes with solar panels and heat recovery systems, as well as upgrading the Grand Hall to modern safety and performance standards. Councillor Nick Wright, cabinet member for leisure and tourism, said: "Dorking Halls is arguably the largest and most comprehensive arts and performance venue in eastern Surrey. It is central to our community and is key to the local economy. Dorking Halls plays a vital cultural role in the district, with a busy programme of shows, concerts and films, as well as hosting youth theatre, school productions, live screenings, and community events. It also provides employment opportunities, particularly for young people entering the hospitality sector. This investment will ensure the Halls continue to serve residents and visitors with high-quality cultural experiences for many years to come, while also helping MVDC to meet its carbon reduction goals."

The Mole Valley's cabinet is expected to agree to the additional funding when it meets on September 23 ahead of formal sign off at the following month's full council. The proposed works will be scheduled to minimise disruption, with the venue expected to close temporarily in 2026 from mid-April to early December. The halls last closed over the summer last year as the council addressed making its ceiling safe after a critical failure risk was identified. Had no work been done there was the potential the Grand Hall's fibrous plaster could become unstable – forcing its closure at short or no notice. Any collapse, regardless of whether the public were in attendance, would likely have led to a fine.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Dorking Halls Grand Hall (Image MVDC)

Related reports:

Dorking Halls to reopen after upgrade

Dorking Halls to get refit

Dorking refurb: "it's behind you"!

Elmbridge resists London's creep into Surrey

Outline plans for 60 homes on the edge of a Surrey village have been scrapped again in a bid to stop "London creeping towards us".

Elmbridge councillors said the land north of Raleigh Drive in Claygate is green belt not 'grey belt' and ruled it unsuitable for housing at a planning meeting on September 16.

They also said the plans failed the flood risk 'sequential test' meaning safer sites should be looked at first before building there.

The scheme would have seen new homes (up to 50 per cent affordable), open space and landscaping built on the land north of Raleigh Drive and to the east of Claygate House.

The application triggered more than 300 objections from residents, alongside opposition from Claygate Parish Council. Concerns centred on traffic, flooding and the loss of open countryside.

Cllr Janet Turner said: "I have seen over the years how London is creeping towards us." The member for Hinchley Wood explained: "When you come out of London to Hinchley Wood or Esher or Long Ditton, you will immediately relax because you have an open aspect.

"This is what Elmbridge and Surrey are all about. This is the entrance into our cultural area and we must protect it. Once it's gone you cannot bring it back."

ISSN 2753-2771

Other members agreed, arguing if you weakened one patch of the green belt, you weakened the whole metropolitan ring. Cllr Alistair Mann described it as "death by a thousand cuts" to the green belt if piecemeal applications keep being approved.

The site, next to Claygate house, once home to a bowls green, pitch and putt course and tennis courts, has reportedly fallen into disrepair.

A similar plan was refused in 2023 and dismissed at appeal last year with inspectors at the time ruling it was inappropriate development in the green belt.

Planning officers initially recommended the new scheme for approval, arguing that housing demand and national policy around the green belt has changed.

Elmbridge can currently only demonstrate a 0.9-year housing supply- well below the five years required by the government. Elmbridge currently has a house building target of 1,443 homes annually.

"Our housing need is so critical now, I don't think this scratchy bit of land is putting green belt in danger," said Cllr Elaine Sesemann.

She explained: "I would protect greenbelt forever along with every other councillor in this chamber but the world of planning has changed so dramatically."

Council leader Mike Rollings admitted the local housing need has dramatically increased since 2023 when the plans were first put forward. However Cllr Rolling still determined the square patch of land was not appropriate for house building.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Illustrative view looking south of application site (left) and former Claygate House with Shanly Homes Oaklands Park development to the rear (Credit: Elmbridge Borough Council)

Epsom residents to get "care closer to home"?

Residents across East Surrey and Surrey Downs are set to benefit from more joined-up healthcare closer to home, as the area becomes one of the first in the country to roll out a new NHS neighbourhood health service.

The initiative forms part of the **National Neighbourhood Health Implementation Programme (NNHIP)** – a flagship element of the NHS Long Term Plan designed to move more care out of hospitals and into communities. Forty-three sites nationwide have been chosen to pioneer the programme, which brings together doctors, nurses, care staff, voluntary sector partners and community organisations into one coordinated neighbourhood team.

The idea is simple but ambitious: to make it easier for people to access help where they live, particularly those with multiple or complex needs, and to reduce pressure on hospitals by intervening earlier and more effectively in the community. Nationally, the NHS has argued that neighbourhood-based teams are key to tackling challenges such as an ageing population, rising demand for urgent care and workforce shortages, while also offering a more personalised, holistic service.

Local impact

Surrey East - covering Reigate, Oxted, Epsom, Dorking and Leatherhead - has already been recognised for its collaborative, place-based approach to health and care as part of the **Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care System (ICS)**. By joining the national programme, local leaders believe they can accelerate that work.

Thirza Sawtell, Place Lead for Surrey East, said:

"Our work within Surrey East has long embraced a neighbourhood-based approach to health and care, and joining the NNHIP marks an exciting opportunity to build on that foundation. Being part of this national programme builds on our ambition to shift care out of hospitals and into the heart of our communities, tailoring care around the specific needs of our residents and putting them at the very heart of our decision making.

"We're proud to be part of a movement that's driving real change in how care is delivered locally, which ultimately will help improve health outcomes, reduce reliance on hospital services, and support our communities to live healthier, more independent lives right where they live."

Alongside East Surrey, **Surrey West** - newly formed from the North West Surrey and Guildford & Waverley alliances - will take part in the **South East Neighbourhood Health Accelerator Programme**, which focuses on strengthening team working,

responding to local health priorities and testing practical projects to improve access to services.

National background

The NHS has been gradually building neighbourhood-level models of care since the publication of the Long Term Plan in 2019. The goal is for Integrated Care Systems across England to establish around 1,000 such neighbourhoods, typically serving populations of 30,000-50,000 people. Each will be supported by multidisciplinary teams – from GPs and district nurses to physiotherapists, mental health workers and social care staff – working together to prevent ill-health and provide continuity of care.

Early pilot schemes in other parts of the country have reported benefits such as fewer hospital admissions for frail patients, faster access to community mental health support, and more proactive management of long-term conditions like diabetes and COPD. The rollout in Surrey East means local residents are among the first to see these principles put into practice.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Image: Idealised neighbour hood health centre

Dorking to slow down?

Plans to cut speed limits in Dorking town centre to 20mph are being considered. Surrey County Council is looking at cutting speeds along the A25 Reigate Road, West Street, South Street, Vincent Lane and surrounding roads – and carrying out a resident survey until October 13 to gather views.

It comes after the county council introduced limits across Surrey in 2024. This proposal is being funded through Surrey's Integrated Transport Schemes – with a countywide budget of £2.8 million.

Before the council can introduce changes it advertises its intentions to give people the opportunity to tell us what they think about them. The council is then obliged to consider any feedback before making a final decision whether to still go ahead, with or without any changes. If there is enough support for the scheme it is anticipated to come into force early next year.

Surrey County Councillor Hazel Watson (Liberal Democrat: Dorking Hills) said lower speed limits give drivers more time to react, reduce the severity of any collisions, and makes the roads safer for vulnerable users. She said: "There will be some additional 20mph signs, but mostly the existing 30mph signs will be replaced."

She added: "She added, "Road safety is a very high priority for Surrey residents and this lower, appropriate, speed limit proposal for Dorking Town has been requested by many residents for a long time. It builds on the very successful introduction of lower, appropriate, 20mph or 30mph speed limits which have been introduced on many of the rural lanes and through the village centres across the Dorking Hills over the last few years."

"It is important that every resident who has an opinion on this proposal registers their comments at https://dorking-20mph-scheme.commonplace.is/ so that their views can be taken into account."

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Dorking Town Centre Streets (image MVDC)

Surrey Heath steps up sell-off drive as council debts mount

Surrey Heath Borough Council is accelerating the disposal of local assets to reduce its debts, with both car parks and town centre shops now on the block.

At its September executive meeting councillors agreed to sell part of Yorktown car park in Sullivan Road, Camberley. Seventy-three of its 137 bays will go, leaving 64, after officials reported average daily use of only 43 vehicles. The site generates just £9,000 a year - £1.26 per bay per week - and is earmarked for housing in the borough's local plan. The sale is expected to provide "much-needed capital" before year end.

The same meeting also approved the disposal of a two-storey retail block in Obelisk Way. Despite being fully let to three shops and producing a gross rental income of £45,000, once landlord costs and service charges were taken into account the site posted a net loss of £4,500 last year. Substantial repairs were also looming. Councillors decided the 15,564 sq ft property, which includes eight parking spaces, would be "more valuable sold than retained" and could be converted for mixed residential use.

The council must cut £1.74m from its budget this year and £3.14m overall, alongside reducing interest payments on external debt and making a further £500,000 from service reviews. Cllr Kel Finan-Cooke, portfolio holder for property and economic development, said the financial case for both sales was "compelling". Conservative deputy leader Cllr Jonny Cope called the Obelisk Way disposal "sensible".

The sales place Surrey Heath in a wider national picture of local authorities struggling to balance their books. Years of shrinking central government funding, soaring social care costs and inflationary pressures have driven several councils close to collapse. Woking, Birmingham, Thurrock and Croydon have all issued effective bankruptcy notices in recent years, with asset sales and service cuts becoming the default response.

Critics warn that one-off disposals risk stripping town centres of public assets for good, but supporters argue such sales are unavoidable if councils are to stave off financial failure and protect statutory services. For Surrey Heath, further reviews of underperforming sites are expected as the borough seeks to navigate its way through England's growing local government funding crisis.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Energy storage plan takes a battering from a Surrey Council

A bid to build a huge battery storage farm on green belt land in Shepperton has been thrown out after councillors decided it didn't pass the 'special circumstances' test needed to build on protected countryside.

Sunbury BESS Ltd wanted to install 50 industrial-scale battery units – each the size of a shipping container – on 3.5 hectares of land north of Charlton Lane, next to the Eco Park. The site, sandwiched between the M3 and the railway line, is designated green belt

Objecting to the scheme, Nigel Spooner said: "We ask the committee to refuse this application and thus avoid inflicting on Charlton village, Shepperton and Sunbury an entirely inappropriate, unnecessary and hazardous blight for the next 40 years."

Officers had originally concluded the project's climate benefits - supporting renewable energy and cutting carbon - outweighed

ISSN 2753-2771

the harm to the green belt and local landscape.

But Spelthorne Borough Council's planning committee threw out the application on September 17, arguing there simply were not any "very special circumstances" to justify bulldozing into green belt land.

The scheme, designed to store energy for the National Grid and release it when demand peaks, was pitched as helping the UK hit its climate targets.

The battery site would store electricity when there is plenty spare and feed it back into the grid when demand is high to help balance the supply. The applicant's agent said at the meeting: "The project will actively contribute to decarbonisation by reducing renewable energy curtailment."

But Green Party Cllr Malcolm Beecher argued: "If we are still using fossil fuel power in our power stations to generate the electricity going into the batteries for storage, we are not reducing our carbon emissions.

"Unless we have a condition that only green energy can be stored in these batteries, there are no special circumstances to have it in the green belt."

The company halved the size of its original plans following strong objections, but locals still were not convinced. Residents wrote more than 40 letters objecting to the proposal, raising fears about fire risk, noise, health hazards and what they described as "the industrialisation" of Shepperton's countryside.

But in the end, it was the location that killed the scheme. Planning officers said the battery farm counted as "inappropriate development" in the Green Belt, causing a "significant loss of openness" and clashing with rules designed to stop urban sprawl.

Despite concerns about fire risks and safety, officials said there was no evidence to refuse the battery farm on these grounds. Surrey Fire and Rescue service as well as the Health and Safety Executive raised no objections.

A planning report stated: "The proposal would introduce a range of industrial plant within an open field, resulting in considerable harm to the openness of the Green Belt and encroaching into the countryside. These harms are not clearly outweighed by the benefits put forward."

The decision is a major blow for Sunbury BESS Ltd, which argued the project would provide vital infrastructure to balance renewable energy supply and demand.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Image: An example of a battery storage "farm": Invenergy Beech Ridge Energy Storage System at Beech Ridge Wind Farm in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Author Z22. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Epsom and Ewell MP calls for SEND action

Helen Maguire MP for Epsom and Ewell renewed her call for immediate government action to address the crisis in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services, following her attendance at both the *Fight for Ordinary SEND* rally on Parliament Square and the Westminster Hall debate on *Children with SEND: Assessments and Support*, held on 15 September 2025.

At the Parliament Square rally, Ms. Maguire met with parents and carers who shared deeply troubling accounts, including cases in which children appear to have been removed from the register for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), despite ongoing and substantial need. Families also raised concerns about long waiting lists, lack of specialist provision, and inconsistent support from local authorities.

A key piece of evidence cited by rally-attendees relates to new findings from the *Centre for Justice Innovation* (CJI). According to CJI's literature review and follow-up research:

- A very high proportion of children who are sentenced by criminal courts have identified SEND. For example, one statistic shows that **71%** of children sentenced between April 2019 and March 2020 had identified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).
- More broadly, children with SEND are significantly overrepresented throughout the youth justice system: amongst

ISSN 2753-2771

those cautioned or sentenced for offences (including serious violence), over **80**% have been recorded as ever having special educational needs; for prolific offenders it's even higher.

- Barriers to effective diversion have been consistently highlighted: children with communication or learning difficulties
 are less likely to be diverted out of the formal justice system because their needs are either unrecognised or
 misinterpreted as behavioural problems.
- The CJI reports that data on SEND in diversion programmes is patchy, with inconsistent recording, varying assessment tools, and a lack of standardisation, which obstructs accountability and improvement.

These findings underline how failures in early identification, assessment, and support not only impact children's education but may also increase risk of contact with the justice system.

Westminster Hall Debate & SEND Petition

The Westminster Hall debate *Children with SEND: Assessments and Support* took place, prompted by a petition titled "Retain legal right to assessment and support in education for children with SEND", which attracted over 122,000 signatures. The petition calls on the Government to maintain existing legal protections (including the EHCP process) and improve the timeliness and quality of assessments.

MPs from across parties spoke powerfully about how delays in EHCP assessment, weak enforcement, and underfunding are leaving children and families without vital support. Some remarked on whether changes being mooted to the law may reduce legal guarantees for EHCPs—something campaigners have strongly opposed.

Case Example from Helen Maguire in Debate

During the debate, Helen Maguire shared a case from her own constituency:

"Four-year-old Maeve lives in my constituency and has cerebral palsy. She requires constant care, is unable to walk, has limited speech and has multiple ongoing medical conditions that require attention. Despite that, and despite the fact that her parents applied to Surrey County Council almost a year ago, the council has refused to even assess her for an EHCP. She started school last week, but still does not have an agreed plan in place."

This story underlines how delays and refusal to assess are not abstract problems—they are happening now and affecting young children with complex needs.

What Must Be Done

Helen Maguire is calling on the Government to take the following measures urgently:

- 1. **Restore and protect the legal rights associated with EHCPs**, ensuring that children who need assessments receive them promptly, and that the process is enforced.
- 2. **Increase funding** to SEND services and local authorities, especially for specialist care, speech and language therapy, and other supports that are in short supply.
- 3. **Shorten waiting lists** and reduce the backlog of assessments, so that children are not forced to begin school (or continue schooling) without the plan and support they are legally entitled to.
- 4. **Ensure better data and transparency**, particularly in diversion and youth justice settings, so the overrepresentation of SEND children is properly understood and addressed.
- 5. **Improve training** among professionals in education, local government and justice system sectors so that SEND is identified and accommodated, not misinterpreted as misconduct or behavioural issues.

Helen Maguire MP said: "We are seeing families shattered by delays, by refusals to assess, by thousands of children starting school without the support they clearly need. The statistics show that without early intervention, children with SEND risk falling into a system that is not equipped for them. The Government must act now—not in months, but immediately—on funding, waiting lists, and legal rights. Our children deserve nothing less."

Sam Jones - Reporter



Related reports:
Surrey MPs slam SEND profiteers
£4.9 million not enough to solve Surrey's SEND problems?
Surrey sent on a U-turn on SEND by MPs?

Big housing development coming to Guildford

Guildford could soon see one of its biggest housing developments in decades, with fresh plans submitted to build up to 1,800 new homes at Gosden Hill.

Developers Martin Grant Homes want to transform farmland off the A3 into a new neighbourhood complete with schools, shops, sports pitches, and even a Park and Ride.

The outline applications sets out a long-term vision for the site, which would include:

- Up to 1,800 homes, including 40 per cent affordable housing
- Six Gypsy and Traveller pitches
- A new local centre with shops, health and community facilities
- Land for both a primary school and secondary school
- Around 10,000sqm of employment floorspace
- A 250-space Park and Ride near the A3
- Large areas of green space, including allotments, play areas, and a new woodland walking rout

Developers say the project would create a "gateway for Guildford" for drivers coming off the A3. The site, covering more than 130 hectares of farmland and woodland, sits between Burpham and the A3. If approved, the first phase 150 homes would be built with access from Merrow Lane.

The bulk of the site will be housing in a mix of family homes, apartments and some specialist accommodation. Planning documents detail the homes will be built in phases including a mixture of sizes from smaller flats to larger family homes, around 720 affordable homes, space for self-build plots and some elderly care housing.

Most of the higher density housing, like apartment blocks, would sit around the centre and the main street of the new community, while the rest of the site would focus on family housing with gardens.

Not everyone will welcome the idea of more traffic but the scheme includes a new A3 junction, cycle paths, and upgraded bus services to ease the pressure on local roads.

About 34 hectares of open space is planned including a big new woodland walking area at Cotts and Frithy's Wood. Developers say overhead power lines will be buried underground and much of the existing woodland kept to help the site blend in with the landscape.

Guildford Borough Council cannot currently meet government housing supply targets so the developers argue the project should be green-lit to help tackle the housing shortage.

If given the green light, Gosden Hill would become home to thousands of people, with the developer promising it will be a "healthy, happy and sociable" place to live.

Only eight people have objected to the scheme so far with the majority of comments slamming the construction traffic plan as "wholly inadequate" for the road and likely to cause "intolerable disruption".

Emily Dalton LDRS

Outline of the proposed development on Gosden Hill Farm. (Credit: Guildford Borough Council/ Martin Grant Homes)

Laser gift to Epsom Hospital shines light on the hand of Jimmy Hendry

The arrival of a major piece of medical equipment always lifts spirits among hospital staff—but the recent installation of a £40,000 laser at Epsom General Orthopaedics held particular poignancy, bringing back memories of a much-loved colleague.

Jimmy Hendry, who died earlier this year aged 73 after a short battle with lung cancer, was a fixture at Epsom and St Helier Hospitals. A devoted soccer fan, grandfather, and generous supporter of charitable causes, he was also a regular donor and strong supporter of the Epsom Medical Equipment Fund (EMEF), the local charity that funded the laser.

Since its founding in June 1979, EMEF has raised well over £5 million to procure medical equipment that would otherwise not be provided by the NHS for Epsom General Hospital. Among its many purchases are a CT scanner, a vascular scanner, liver diagnosis equipment, and devices that help treat broken wrists without recourse to surgery.

At the heart of EMEF is Bess Harding, the Fund Coordinator, who holds an MBE. She works closely with volunteers, trustees, NHS staff and the wider community to identify equipment needs, raise funds, and oversee distribution.

"We know Jimmy is still sorely missed," says Bess Harding. "He worked at both Epsom and St. Helier Hospitals and was known too for cleverly 'inventing' medical equipment: such as the Hendry Hand which played an important role in wrist fractures."

Jimmy delighted in sport—he donned boots and shirts for Chelsea in 1980, Charlton in 1990, later turning out for Sutton FC. He also served as a physiotherapist for local teams. Bess adds: "His popularity was clear when well over 200 people attended the funeral."

Jimmy lived locally and leaves five children and three grandchildren. The Nuvolas laser now in place is invaluable for ENT procedures, allowing surgeons to treat delicate areas with accuracy. Thanks to his generosity and EMEF's dedication, that legacy will continue to light the way.

Surrey Uni studies the climate friendly way to grow our lettuces

Vertical farming has been hailed as a futuristic answer to Britain's food security challenges - but a new study led by the University of Surrey suggests the picture is more complicated.

The research, published in *Food and Energy Security*, found that while vertical farms can deliver extraordinary crop yields and use far less water than traditional fields, their carbon footprint still exceeds that of soil-based farming.

What is vertical farming?

Unlike conventional agriculture, vertical farms grow crops indoors, often in stacked trays under carefully controlled light, temperature and humidity. Plants are usually grown without soil, using hydroponic or aeroponic systems that deliver nutrients directly to their roots. This means vertical farms can operate in cities, warehouses, or disused buildings – and, crucially, they are not dependent on weather or seasons.

ISSN 2753-2771

Proponents argue that this approach could free up farmland for nature, cut transport emissions by producing food closer to consumers, and help guarantee supplies as climate change disrupts traditional growing regions.

The Surrey-led study

The University of Surrey team compared lettuce grown in a commercial UK vertical farm with lettuce from two UK field farms - one on mineral soil and one on peat - and with Spanish farms, which supply around 95% of Britain's winter lettuce.

They found that vertical farms can produce more than 20 times the yield of field farms: around 97 kilograms of lettuce per square metre, compared with just 3.3 kilograms outdoors. Water use is also dramatically lower, at $0.9 \text{ m}^3/\text{kg}$ compared with up to $7.3 \text{ m}^3/\text{kg}$ in Spain.

But the greenhouse gas emissions are still higher. Even when powered by renewable energy, vertically farmed lettuce produced about 0.93 kg of greenhouse gases per kilogram, compared with 0.57 kg from UK field farms.

Energy and materials the key hurdles

Much of the carbon burden comes from the heavy energy demands of lighting and climate control, as well as the jute fibre plugs used to support plant roots. Researchers estimate that swapping these for alternatives such as coconut coir could cut the land footprint of vertical farms by more than 95%.

Michael Gargaro, Postgraduate Researcher at Surrey's Centre for Environment and Sustainability and lead author of the study, said:

"Vertical farming has the potential to transform food security in the UK, particularly as climate change and seasonal drought place growing pressure on traditional agriculture. Our research shows that while the technology can bring far higher yields and reduce water use, it currently comes with a higher carbon cost. The challenge now is to make vertical farming more energy-efficient and better integrated with renewable systems, so that it can become a truly sustainable solution."

Dr Zoe M Harris, Director of the Centre and Co-Director of the Institute for Sustainability, added:

"With around 95 per cent of lettuce imported from Spain during the winter months, advances in vertical farming make it possible to secure a year-round supply of fresh produce while freeing up land for restoration. But to viably compete with field farming, vertical farms must cut their energy use and rethink the materials they rely on."

Can vertical farms really feed the UK?

The study concludes that vertical farms are not yet the most sustainable option for lettuce. But with further innovation – particularly in energy efficiency and material use – they could become an essential part of Britain's food system. For now, they remain a promising supplement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional farming.

The research was funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC).