



## Surrey town going to the dogs with 24/7 gambling casino?

7 August 2025



A budding Surrey casino has applied for a 24/7 gambling licence despite local opposition. Golden Slots (Southern) Limited has asked for a 24/7 gambling licence for an adult gaming centre in the former Barclays bank building on Church Street, Ashford.

Spelthorne Borough Council has refused planning permission three times for the gaming centre- but was eventually overruled at appeal in April 2025.

The government planning inspector green lit the scheme but the approval came with conditions: the 24-hour opening hours originally proposed were reduced to 9am-11pm and requirements were placed on sound insulation and managing potential late night disturbances.

The applicant's agent said: "Irrespective of whether a premises licence is granted to operate 24/7 my client does not intend to breach any planning condition on opening hours."

The licencing application states "the premises will be open 24/7" and states there is no restriction on opening times for adult gaming centres. According to the council, the adult gaming centre would still have to comply with planning conditions even if a 24-hour licence was granted. The discrepancy regarding opening hours can be dealt with at the sub-committee hearing.

Spelthorne councillors voted to support a national campaign urging the Government to modernise gambling laws at a full council meeting on July 17.

The motion proposed by Cllr Harry Boparai and seconded by Cllr Katherine Rutherford calls for councils to be granted powers to implement stronger safeguards to better protect communities from gambling-related harm and to work with local health and voluntary sector partners to signpost residents to gambling addiction support and education initiatives.

The gambling licence application details an electronic lock will be used between 10pm-8am with the door locked during these hours and opened by a staff member when a customer wants to enter the casino.

The maglock will also be used when the machines are being emptied and refloated when the premises will be closed, the application said.

The application reads: "At least two members of staff working on site at any given time on the basis of a maximum of eight customers, if the numbers increase then an additional member of staff will be used for busier periods."

Proposed design layouts of the casino show 42 seats around the edge of the premises, including a kiosk/ customer service desk with 20 seats. The number and type of adult gaming machines have not been included in the licence application.

The application also includes a local gambling risk assessment outlining how the operator plans to minimise harm to children, vulnerable people and the wider community.

Mitigation measures include 24-hour CCTV, staff training, a 'Think 25' age verification policy and access to self-exclusion tools for customers.

The risk assessment acknowledges the site's proximity to schools, care homes, ATMs and existing gambling premises but insists there is a low risk of harm because of the proposed safeguards.

The application read: "Golden Slots is an established operator that has held an Operating Licence since January 2016 without any enforcement action taken against it. It operates other sites in Milton Keynes, Haringey, Cricklewood and Northampton."

Residents can comment on the application on the council's website until August 27. Police and public health officials can also submit comments.

Plans submitted to turn the vacant bank into an 24/7 adult gaming centre (image Google)

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## Asylum hotel tension mounts in Surrey

7 August 2025



The leader of Spelthorne Borough Council has again written to the Home Office, demanding the government to abandon controversial plans to use Stanwell Hotel exclusively for single male asylum seekers.

The Home Office announced on August 1 it was temporarily pausing the scheme. But it has not been abandoned.

In her second letter on the matter, this time addressed to the Minister of State for Border Security and Asylum, Cllr Joanne Sexton warned the Home Office there could be "further escalation within the community" if this "urgent and significant" issue is not seen to.

She wrote: "I am writing to you to register heightened community concern over the potential consequences of the proposed changes and the impact they will have on Stanwell Village."

The renewed letter comes just days after hundreds of people protested outside the hotel near Heathrow Airport. Dozens of signs were held stating 'Just say no' and people were chanting outside the hotel.

So far two people have been arrested during the protests, one on suspicion of attempted arson and another on suspicion of "conspiracy to commit violent disorder and aggravated trespass".

Councillors and Spelthorne MP Lincoln Jopp have also expressed disappointment at the situation, urging the Home Office to listen to the community.

The Home Office have since paused the plans but Cllr Sexton has urged for a meeting to be arranged with herself and the Labour Group Leader, Cllr Jon Button, in whose ward the hotel is located.

In her first letter on July 25, Cllr Sexton had warned the Home Office has caused "alarm" in the community and is completely inappropriate for the area.

She said the decision would undo months of successful integration and was made without any proper consultation with the council or residents.

A Home Office spokesperson said: "The government is reducing expensive hotel use as part of a complete overhaul of the asylum system."

"From over 400 asylum hotels open in summer 2023, costing almost £9m a day, there are now less than 210, and we want them all closed by the end of this



Parliament.

"We will continue to work closely with community partners across the country, and discuss any concerns they have, as we look to fix this broken system together. The security of the local communities within which hotels are located will always be our paramount concern."

Image: Stanwell Hotel protest on July 31. (Credit: Sam Jennings/ Facebook) Permission for use.

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## Carers respite at the Crossroads in Surrey?

7 August 2025



A row has erupted over the sudden withdrawal of Surrey County Council funding for respite care provided by the long-standing charity, Crossroads Care Surrey, leaving hundreds of unpaid carers uncertain about their future support.

Crossroads Care Surrey announced this week it has stepped in to safeguard the wellbeing of **274 unpaid carers** after what it calls a "**U-turn**" by the local authority on a previously agreed commitment to honour their full entitlement to respite breaks.

The charity, which has delivered government-funded respite care for unpaid carers across Surrey for **over 14 years**, was **given six months' notice in February 2025** that its contract—due to run until **March 2027**—would end early on **4 August 2025**.

The controversy surrounds carers who were told they would still receive **their full allocation of 70 hours of respite**, even after the early termination of the contract. However, according to Crossroads, the Council has now **withdrawn that commitment**, leaving carers with "just a few weeks' notice" of lost support.

*"This abrupt U-turn not only breaks the promise made to unpaid carers, it also places already exhausted individuals in an impossible position," said **Terry Hawkins**, CEO of Crossroads Care Surrey. "We know just how vital these respite breaks are for carers' mental and physical health... the loss of this service will undoubtedly place an even greater burden on the already stretched GPs and hospitals across the county."*

*Despite the withdrawal of public funds, Crossroads confirmed that thanks to a surge of **generous donations**, the charity will **continue delivering the promised respite hours until 30 November 2025**.*

*"Whilst it's deeply disappointing to see the council walk away from their commitment, we're proud to stand by unpaid carers when they need us most," added Hawkins. "It has given us the means to do the right thing, and we are incredibly grateful."*

The charity is urging carers affected by the cut to **contact Surrey County Council** if they wish to **challenge the withdrawal** or explore **alternative respite options**. Carers can also access support beyond November through **Crossroads Direct**, a self-funded version of the service.

### "We're Putting Choice Back in Carers' Hands"

In response to the criticism, **Cllr Sinead Mooney**, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, insisted the authority had **worked constructively** with Crossroads to manage the transition.

*"We're pleased that Crossroads Care Surrey has confirmed they will honour their agreements with carers by continuing to offer replacement care for those with remaining hours, following the end of the council's contract,"*  
*said Cllr Mooney.*

*She explained that the replacement respite care was provided under **individual agreements** between carers and Crossroads, **not directly guaranteed by the Council**.*

*The Council defended its decision to introduce a **new carers' wellbeing support scheme**, offering **£300 on a pre-paid card** to give carers "**complete flexibility**" over how they arrange their breaks.*

*"This new offer... has the potential to benefit many more carers across Surrey," said Mooney, adding that it puts "**choice and control back in the hands of carers**. Our priority is to support carers in the best way we possibly can with the resources we have."*

*The Council also pointed to its "**Good**" rating from the Care Quality Commission, which cited **co-produced strategies with carers** as part of its ongoing commitment to improvement.*

*Mooney urged any carer affected to contact the County Council's information and advice service.*

Crossroads Care Surrey says this is about **trust and continuity**—many carers joined the service with the understanding that **support would remain**, regardless of the Council's early termination of the contract.

As the situation unfolds, the spotlight falls on the **financial and strategic pressures** facing local authorities, and whether charitable donations can sustainably replace **core public service funding**.

Crossroads has reaffirmed its **mission to campaign** for the rights of unpaid carers and is calling on individuals, businesses, and communities to help ensure that "**no carer is left without support**."

For further details, visit: [crossroadscaresurrey.org.uk](http://crossroadscaresurrey.org.uk)

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*If you are an unpaid carer affected by the recent changes, contact Surrey County Council's adult social care information and advice line or Crossroads Care Surrey for assistance.*

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## Surrey MPs slam SEND profiteers

7 August 2025



A new analysis of Surrey's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision reveals growing concern over spiralling costs, limited local authority capacity, and soaring profits among private providers - all while many children with special needs remain without adequate support.

The situation has drawn particular attention following the release of financial data from companies operating independent special schools across the UK, including in Surrey. The Witherslack Group, which operates Bramley Hill School in Tadworth, reported a turnover of £208 million and an operating profit of £44.6 million this year - up from £172.8 million turnover and £34.8 million profit the year before. Some private providers, backed by private equity firms, have posted profit margins exceeding 20%.

In contrast, Surrey County Council - responsible for delivering education for over 16,000 children in the county with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) - faces an ongoing struggle to balance growing demand against limited state sector capacity. The Council's own figures show that last year, it spent **£122 million**—almost half of its **£270 million high needs block grant**—on placements at non-maintained and independent schools.

The root of the issue lies in a long-standing shortage of suitable local authority-run SEND schools, which has left the Council heavily reliant on private sector provision. That reliance has come at a cost, both financial and human. According to Council data, **1,809 children in Surrey were recorded as being out of school for over a third of the time during the 2023/24 academic year**. Campaigners and parents report delays in assessments, a lack of transparency in placement decisions, and limited accountability from some providers.

The County Council has committed to increasing in-county SEND provision. Its **SEND Capital Programme**, launched in 2020, aims to create **1,500 new maintained school places by 2030**, with hundreds already in development. But critics argue progress is too slow, and that excessive profits among private providers are draining funds that could otherwise support local services.

Surrey's six Liberal Democrat MPs - Al Pinkerton, Chris Coglan, Helen Maguire, Monica Harding, Will Forster, and Zöe Franklin - have now called for **a legal cap on profits** made by private SEND providers. They propose a maximum margin of **8%**, aligning with figures cited by the Office for National Statistics for average business profitability. The same threshold has also been suggested by the Education Secretary in the context of children's social care reform.

In a joint statement, the MPs said:

"It is completely unacceptable that the top private SEND providers in Surrey are lining their pockets by exploiting a system that has been left in crisis by repeated failures from the Conservatives. Supporting places at non-maintained independent schools accounted for £122 million last year - money that could go further in public provision."

"We are deeply concerned to see this greedy profiteering from private equity firms, especially when parents across Surrey are raising serious concerns about standards and support at some schools, including Bramley Hill."

Surrey County Council has not commented directly on the profit figures but continues to highlight its strategic commitment to invest in new local SEND places. Its latest SEND Partnership Strategy focuses on co-producing services with families, improving timely access to support, and reducing reliance on high-cost placements. However, significant financial risks remain. In February, the Council acknowledged its high needs block deficit was continuing to grow, even with Government intervention schemes such as the "Safety Valve" programme.

Meanwhile, media scrutiny continues to follow the role of private companies in special education nationally. The BBC recently investigated complaints involving private SEND schools, and MPs including Monica Harding have raised questions in Parliament about accountability and off-rolling practices.

Parents and campaigners across Surrey continue to call for stronger regulation, more timely provision, and long-term investment in inclusive education. As one parent told *EET*: "We need a system that puts children first - not shareholders."

Image: cc Bruce Matsunaga. Licence details

## Guildford Council's CEO's salary touches the UK Prime Minister's

7 August 2025



Guildford and Waverley Borough Council's chief executive's new salary will be £169,950 after a three per cent pay rise was agreed - despite the likelihood the two councils will soon be dissolved as part of local government reorganisation.

[The annual salary for a UK Prime Minister is £172,153, which includes £80,807 for the role of Prime Minister and an additional £91,346 for being an MP.]

Pedro Wrobel was appointed as the new joint chief executive in 2024, having previously been Westminster City Council's executive director for innovation and change. He replaced former boss Tom Horwood, who said he was standing down from the then £150,000 job due to health concerns.

Other options that had been on the table at the Thursday, July 31 Guildford and Waverley Joint Senior Staff Committee included a 3.2 per cent bump, welcomed by the Union for Local Authorities CEO's and Senior Managers, as well as a bumper one-off £25,500 lump sum that would have ramped the position's salary up to £185,000. The council said this would have brought the role in line with similar shared CEO roles such as Broadland District and South Norfolk, as well as Boston Borough, East Lindsey District, and South Holland District.

In the end, the committee took all of two minutes to agree on a three per cent rise — the equivalent of an extra £4,950 a year. The union UNISON has already agreed a three per cent award for Waverley Borough Council employees. No agreement for Guildford Borough Council employees has been agreed.

A spokesperson for Waverley Borough Council said: "This decision aligns with the pay award agreed with UNISON for Waverley Borough Council employees, and the councils' Joint Leadership Team. Maintaining a competitive remuneration package is essential to attract and retain high-calibre leadership. The benchmarking data shows that many councils with similar or even smaller populations and fewer employees offer higher salaries. A modest increase helps to ensure the council remains competitive in a challenging recruitment market."

Mr Wrobel's new salary is among the highest received by council bosses in the Southeast and Surrey - although on a per head of population basis it is the lowest among similar councils with a joint role. This, the council argues, reflects the significant scale and complexity of the Guildford and Waverley job - with a combined population of more than 270,000 and responsibility for a workforce of more than 1,100 employees and 100 borough councillors.

The councils rejected the 3.2 per cent offer as it would have created inconsistency with the rest of the leadership team. While the one-off uplift to £185,000 would have represented a 12 per cent increase, significantly above local and national pay trends, it was therefore considered inappropriate and difficult to justify financially at this time.

**Epsom and Ewell Times adds:**



#### Chief Executive Salaries - Surrey Councils

Figures are the most recently published base salaries or salary bands. Some councils report ranges, others exact figures, and a few include allowances or car benefits.

Council	Chief Executive Salary (approx)
Surrey County Council	£234,600 (former CEO)
Guildford & Waverley	£169,950
Epsom & Ewell	£131,000 - £152,000 + 4% allowance
Mole Valley	£122,000 - £136,000
Elmbridge	Up to £140,000+ (approval required)
Reigate & Banstead	£137,500 - £144,500
Runnymede	£100,000+ (not specified)
Spelthorne	Up to £131,000
Surrey Heath	£136,800 + £2,000 car allowance
Tandridge	£122,000 - £138,000 (grade range)
Woking	Not disclosed

New CEO Pedro Wrobel (image GBC) and UK PM Starmer

## A Surrey Council debates its bank's "support" for Gaza genocide

7 August 2025



Pro-Palestinian campaigners have urged a Surrey council to cut financial ties with Barclays Bank, accusing the firm, of funding what they called Israel's "genocide of the Palestinian people". But no formal decision on divestment was made at the meeting.

Simon Higgins, on behalf of West Surrey Palestine Solidarity Campaign, delivered a statement to Guildford Borough Council on July 30, calling for the authority to take an "ethical and moral stand" by divesting from Barclays.

He claimed research shows Barclays holds billions in shares and loans to arms companies whose weapons are being used in Israel in attacks on Palestinians.

"If Guildford Borough Council keeps investing in Barclays, it's helping fund this genocide," Mr Higgins said. "This cannot continue." He added the bank helps the Israeli government raise money by acting as a dealer for its bonds.

Mr Higgins said: "Data obtained by independent research organisation, Profundo has revealed that

- Barclays holds over £2 billion in shares and provides £6.1 billion in loans and underwriting to nine companies whose weapons are being used by Israel in its genocidal attacks on the Palestinian people.
- Investment and financial services to these arms companies facilitates the provision of weapons for Israel's attacks.
- Barclays acts as a 'primary dealer' for Israel's government bonds, enabling it to raise money to fund its genocidal policies. By investing in Barclays, GBC is aiding this genocide."
- He said over 700 local people have signed a petition calling for the council to divest, adding both the Mayor of Guildford and the council's finance lead have acknowledged the seriousness of the situation.

Responding to the claims, Cllr Richard Lucas, lead for finance and property said he shared Mr Higgins' horror at what is happening in Gaza, but did not believe the case against Barclays was clear-cut.

Cllr Lucas said: "[ Guildford council ] share Mr Higgins' revulsion of what is going on but we don't think he has made a clear case against Barclays and furthermore we are not in a position to make a detailed judgment on this."

"We're already moving away from Barclays as part of our wider investment strategy," he added. "We understand the concerns, but we have to make decisions responsibly."

He said the research quoted by Higgins contradicts Barclays' own statements, which say the bank doesn't use its own money to invest in arms companies and that it pulled out of Israeli government bond deals last summer.

Cllr Lucas also explained how the council's investment policy works. "We follow national guidelines that tell us to prioritise security and liquidity, and to act as responsible investors," he said.

The council currently has two investments with Barclays - £3 million in a 95-day notice account (which is already being withdrawn), and £1.5 million in bonds that mature in 2027. Lucas said pulling out of the latter early would result in a significant financial loss.

"We're already moving away from Barclays as part of our wider investment strategy," he added. "We understand the concerns, but we have to make decisions responsibly."

Speaking afterwards, Mr Higgins said: "At the meeting I was shut down and denied a right of reply. This is unfair, undemocratic and unconstitutional."

Image credit: rawpixel.com CC 1 License details

## Almost any listening environment on Earth coming to Surrey

7 August 2025



A new national audio hub featuring world-first acoustic facilities is being built at the University of Surrey, thanks to £2.2 million in funding from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). The facilities will allow researchers to simulate almost any listening environment on Earth, from a quiet living room or modern office to a vast concert hall, cathedral or bustling city street.

At the heart of AURORA³ (Anechoic and Universal Research Observation Rooms for Audio, Acoustics & AI) will be two world-class audio environments: a state-of-the-art anechoic chamber with a spherical loudspeaker array and a first-of-its-kind variable acoustics room capable of adjusting both reverberation time and physical volume at the push of a button. AURORA³ will be open to researchers from both academia and industry across the UK and globally, as well as to Surrey staff and students.

Professor Enzo De Sena, Director of the Institute of Sound Recording at the University of Surrey, and Fellow of the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI, said:

"AURORA³ will create a national hub for excellence in sound and AI, allowing researchers to generate reproducible data, test innovations in controlled and lifelike environments, and shape technologies that benefit society."

The initiative aims to unite the Audio, Acoustics and AI (A³) research community and fuel breakthroughs in sound technology by enabling more accurate modelling of the physical and perceptual phenomena involved in real-world hearing. AURORA³ will pave the way for voice assistants and remote communications that are more robust to noise and reverberation, more immersive Virtual and Augmented Reality experiences for entertainment and virtual prototyping, and smarter hearing aid devices that better understand and adapt to the acoustic scene.

AURORA³ will be hosted at Surrey's Institute of Sound Recording - part of the School of Arts, Humanities and Creative Industries - and co-led with the University's Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing (CVSSP). The facilities will also work in collaboration with the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI, the CoSTAR National Lab, and is backed by a consortium of 18 partners and 12 key users, including the BBC, Meta, KEF, Imperial College London, the University of Cambridge, and non-profits such as the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and the Institute of Acoustics.

Professor Enzo De Sena continued:

"Combined with the UK's deep AI talent pool and rapidly expanding computing capacity, AURORA³ provides the missing facility for audio data capture, placing the UK at the centre of global audio and acoustics research."

Image: Professor Enzo and the AURORA logo: credit Surrey University

## Box Hill teacher with naked boy interest struck off

7 August 2025



A teacher has been struck off and banned from the profession after being found with hundreds of indecent images of children and a search history looking for naked young boys. Nicholas Heuvel worked at Box Hill School Trust in Mickleham, Dorking from September 1997 before resigning in 2017.

The school was a private boarding and day school until it merged with Reigate Grammar School and became RGS Surrey Hills in 2025.

Between January 2016 and January 2018, Mr Heuvel had up to 224 indecent images of children on his phone, including at least one of the most extreme kind. He also admitted to searching for terms including 'little boy nudists' and 'young boy speedos', between 22 October 2017 and 23 October 2017, and was given a police caution in 2021.

The Teacher Regulation Agency rejected Mr Heuvel's claim that he wasn't sexually motivated, finding no plausible innocent explanation and, on the balance of probabilities, that he was seeking gratification.

The panel, which concluded its findings on July 15 this year, said Mr Heuvel's viewing and searching for significant numbers of indecent images of children over a lengthy period of time were relevant to his position as a teacher. They said it amounted to serious misconduct and fell significantly short of the standards expected of the profession.

There was also a lack of any evidence that Mr Heuvel made any effort to report the images - which he would have known he needed to do by virtue of his role as a teacher and the safeguarding training he would have received.

David Oatley, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education, said that the period of time with which Mr Heuvel used specific search terms to access indecent images of children was a significant factor and that the risk of repetition was high due to Mr Heuvel's lack of insight and or remorse into his actions and the impact that his actions had on children.

Mr Oatley said: "Mr Nicholas James Heuvel is prohibited from teaching indefinitely and cannot teach in any school, sixth form college, relevant youth accommodation or children's home in England. "Furthermore, in view of the seriousness of the allegations found proved against him, I have decided that Mr Heuvel shall not be entitled to apply for restoration of his eligibility to teach."

Hayley Robinson, headteacher of RGS Surrey Hills, formerly Box Hill School, said: 'We very much support the decision of the Teaching Regulation Agency to regard the safety of children as the highest priority in our profession. "We note that Nicholas Heuvel was struck off for matters unconnected with allegations about his behaviour at Box Hill School and relate to the years 2017-18, nearly a decade ago. RGS Surrey Hills is now a member of the prestigious Reigate Grammar School group of schools, where safeguarding and pupil safety and wellbeing is at the centre of everything we do."

Box Hill School before it merged to become RGS Surrey Hills (image Google)



## Water voles return to Ewell

7 August 2025



Once extinct in the county, the much-loved water vole has today (30th July) made an historic return to the Upper Hogsmill in Epsom & Ewell. This milestone is the result of a pioneering wetland restoration project led by the South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and reintroduction project by rewilding organisation Citizen Zoo, with support from Wildwood Trust, Natural England Species Recovery Programme, Thames Water and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

Around 50 water voles were released onto the Hogsmill river and Chamber Meads wetland this morning at a celebratory event. This was the culmination of many years of work by the South East Rivers Trust, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Citizen Zoo, and partners to restore the river and create the new wetland habitat. The return of this endangered species marks a major milestone for Surrey's biodiversity and one of the most exciting rewilding projects in the region.

"Water voles were once a familiar sight on the Hogsmill, but due to habitat loss and invasive predators, they died out. Now, after years of dedicated river restoration work, and the creation of the flagship wetland at Chamber Mead, as well as extensive monitoring by a band of dedicated local volunteers, we're thrilled to have brought them back to the upper Hogsmill in Surrey," said **Dr Bella Davies**, CEO of the South East Rivers Trust.

The **Wildwood Trust**, based in Kent and Devon, is one of the UK's leading centres for conservation breeding, and bred 50 water voles through its expert captive breeding programme for release on the upper Hogsmill river. Wildwood has played a key role in restoring water vole populations across the UK.

"The UK's biodiversity is facing a critical decline – putting our ecosystems, food security, and climate resilience at risk," said **Tyrone Capel**, Conservation Officer at Wildwood Trust. "Ambitious rewilding projects like this are central to our mission: returning nature to the places it once thrived. We're proud to support this initiative by breeding water voles for release along the Hogsmill and ultimately reversing the near 20 year extinction of Water voles in Surrey."

The creation of the **Chamber Mead wetlands** and river restoration work undertaken by SERT has improved conditions on the Hogsmill and transformed the area into an ideal habitat for water voles. This work forms part of SERT's broader vision to revive this rare urban chalk stream and inspire nature recovery in towns and cities.

**Citizen Zoo**, a rewilding organisation that has delivered a previous successful water vole release along the Hogsmill further downstream in Kingston, led on the reintroduction. The team is now calling for local volunteers to support ongoing monitoring of the population.

"This is not just a win for water voles—it's a flagship moment for urban river restoration across the UK," said **Elliot Newton**, -Director of Rewilding at Citizen Zoo. "With the help of local people, we're giving this species a real chance to thrive again."

"We are deeply committed to protecting and nurturing habitats that help biodiversity flourish, and we are honoured that the Upper Hogsmill River in our borough has been chosen as the second release site for the reintroduction of water voles," said **Councillor Liz Frost**, Chair of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Environment Committee. "They will be the first water voles living in the wild in Surrey for over 20 years. This milestone reflects the strength of our partnerships to create the right conditions for these once-extinct animals to thrive and reflects our borough's dedication to managing biodiversity and creating resilient ecosystems that play a role in tackling climate change."

Water voles—made famous as Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*—are one of the UK's fastest-declining mammals, having disappeared from 94% of their former range. Their return to Surrey is both a symbolic and ecological milestone.

Wild Wood Trust

## Leatherhead railway station gets access upgrade

7 August 2025



A major upgrade to Leatherhead railway station has officially opened, marking what local MP Helen Maguire has called a "crucial step" in the campaign to make rail travel more accessible across Surrey.

The improvements, delivered through the Department for Transport's Access for All programme, include the installation of two 16-person lifts and a new footbridge linking both platforms. The £6.2 million project also included platform widening, upgraded lighting and CCTV, and enhanced ramp access. The enhancements are designed to make life easier for elderly and disabled passengers, as well as those travelling with pushchairs, bikes or heavy luggage.

The scheme was developed and delivered by Network Rail in partnership with Southern, with much of the work taking place over the past year. Prior to the upgrade, Leatherhead was nominally step-free, but passengers needing to avoid stairs had to take a lengthy, steep detour under a railway bridge outside the station to move between platforms. The new bridge and lifts provide a direct and safe route for all users, replacing what many had described as an awkward and at times treacherous alternative.

Opening the new facilities, Helen Maguire MP praised the scheme as a long-overdue improvement for passengers in the area. "I'm delighted that Leatherhead has become the latest station in my constituency with step-free access," she said. "These improvements are absolutely vital for our town, and a crucial step in making rail travel more accessible to my constituents regardless of their need."

However, the Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom and Ewell also used the occasion to highlight wider concerns about the state of the rail network in her constituency. In particular, she pointed to the reduction in the number of South Western Railway (SWR) services running to and from Waterloo since the Covid pandemic. "South Western Railways should also increase the frequency of the Waterloo service back to pre-Covid levels to ensure that passengers are not overcrowded," she said, noting that passenger numbers have increased while service levels have not kept pace.

Maguire also raised the ongoing lack of sufficient blue badge parking spaces at local stations, and the need for ticketing systems that are more accessible for people with visual impairments. With SWR now operating under national ownership, she said, passengers would be expecting higher standards of service. "Delays to the Arterio train rollout and extortionate ticket price rises are a worrying start," she added. "I will keep campaigning to ensure that rail passengers in Epsom, Ewell, Ashtead and Leatherhead get a fair deal."

Southern, which manages Leatherhead station, has also introduced cycling improvements alongside the accessibility works. A secure cycle hub with 26 spaces and a maintenance area has been installed on Platform 1, while Platform 2 now features a double-deck cycle rack with space for 32 bikes, as well as new motorbike parking. Lighting and CCTV coverage in these areas has also been upgraded.



Jenny Saunders, Customer Services Director at Southern's parent company Govia Thameslink Railway, welcomed the improvements, saying: "Lifts benefit everyone who finds stairs a barrier, and for some disabled passengers this project has the potential to be life-changing."

Leatherhead joins a growing list of stations to receive Access for All funding, with similar projects completed in recent months at Barnes, Herne Bay and Motspur Park. The scheme forms part of a wider national programme to modernise railway infrastructure and open up travel to all users, regardless of mobility needs.

Network Rail's Sussex Route Director Lucy McAuliffe said: "These upgrades have removed a significant barrier to travel at Leatherhead. We're proud to be making a difference for passengers who, for too long, have had to navigate difficult routes to use our railway."

While the transformation at Leatherhead station represents a clear step forward, campaigners and passengers alike will be watching closely to see whether service levels and surrounding facilities are brought up to the same standard.

Image: MP Helen Maguire opens Leatherhead upgraded railway station