

Surrey leaders promise smooth transition to unitaries

19 March 2026



On Friday 13 March, the East and West Surrey Joint Committees met to continue preparations for the transition to new unitary councils ahead of “vesting day” on 1 April 2027.

The committees, made up of councillors from existing Surrey authorities, are meeting monthly to lay the groundwork for the creation of East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council. This interim phase will continue until Shadow Authorities are formally established following elections in May 2026. The focus is on ensuring stability and effective planning during a period of significant local government change.

Financial pressures and planning challenges highlighted

Members reviewed progress from the Implementation Team (Programme Board), which is overseeing the transition. A draft illustrative financial baseline was presented, offering an early indication of the financial position the new councils are likely to inherit.

The report highlighted that both East and West Surrey are expected to face ongoing financial pressures, including rising demand for services and constrained resources—challenges that would exist irrespective of reorganisation.

Particular concern was noted in parts of West Surrey, where historic debt issues—especially those linked to Woking—will require careful management. The importance of robust governance, financial oversight and continued engagement with government on potential debt support was emphasised.

A recent ministerial letter from Alison McGovern MP confirmed that the government would “continue to explore what further debt support is required at a later point”.

Scrutiny and governance arrangements

Looking ahead to the Shadow Authority phase, councillors discussed how implementation plans will be reviewed. Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committees will be established to provide independent challenge to decision-making, helping ensure plans are realistic, legally sound and properly risk-assessed.

A draft timetable for meetings during the Shadow period was also considered, with initial meetings expected to begin from 20 May 2026.

Devolution discussions continue

Surrey councils are continuing discussions with government on a potential countywide Strategic Authority, which could bring greater local control over areas such as economic growth.

Councils will consider whether to submit an expression of interest for a “Foundational Strategic Authority” — a non-mayoral model that could act as a stepping stone towards a future mayoral arrangement.

Leaders emphasise stability and strong foundations

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council and Senior Responsible Officer for the programme, said the work was about “planning ahead, being honest about the challenges, and making sure the new councils start on a strong footing.”

Cllr Bridget Kendrick, Chair of the East Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Mole Valley District Council, said the focus was on “clear programme governance” and “strengthening scrutiny and oversight” to ensure a smooth transition.

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Chair of the West Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Woking Borough Council, added that the priority was to establish “two stable and resilient councils... providing confidence, continuity and stability through the transition.”

What happens next

The next meetings of the Joint Committees are due to take place in April, with dates and venues to be confirmed. Meetings will continue to be webcast.

Background: what the changes mean

From April 2027, Surrey's current two-tier system of county, district and borough councils will be replaced by two unitary authorities—East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council—each responsible for delivering all local services.

Elections for the new councils will take place on 7 May 2026, after which elected members will act as Shadow Authorities to oversee the transition.

Until then, residents will continue to access services through existing councils in the usual way.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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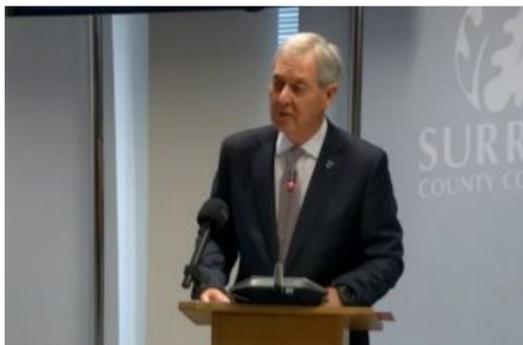
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Surrey County Council death throes debate

19 March 2026



Tensions boiled over in the council chamber as outgoing Surrey County Council leader Conservative Cllr Tim Oliver defended his administration and staff against accusations from local MPs and opposition councillors. He accused them of "cheap political mudslinging" against "the very people dedicating their working lives to helping others".

Speaking at the final full council meeting before the May elections, Cllr Oliver said a "small number of recently elected MPs have crossed the line multiple times" despite repeated attempts to engage with them on sensitive issues and the complex services the council provides.

Liberal Democrat MPs said after the meeting they make "no apologies for sticking up for residents".

"They continually undermine the work of dedicated expert staff, largely from a position of naivety and ignorance, all to try and score political points," Cllr Oliver said. "Cheap political mudslinging impacts the very people dedicating their working lives to helping others."

Cllr Oliver read aloud the words of a staff member from the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Directorate, describing how political attacks felt like a "personal blow". He read: "Most people will never see the hours spent untangling difficult cases, the compassion behind tough decisions, or the sheer persistence required to get things right [...] Words have consequences beyond political point scoring."

The criticism comes after a damning BBC report revealed the county council had been formally sanctioned by the SEND tribunal in 38 cases over a five-month period. The council said barring notices were issued during an "exceptionally high period of activity", according to the report. An ITV report claimed Surrey adults with learning disabilities face "dangerous" cuts to care; meanwhile the council insists it is increasing investment in the service and encouraging people to speak up if they feel the assessment does not meet their needs.

Cllr Oliver has urged MPs to engage constructively with staff and warned that the workforce would not easily forget years of political attacks. "While you may claim that your words are not directed at officers, I'm afraid there is no avoiding the impacts of cheap politicisation of serious and complex work," he said.

A statement later issued after the meeting read: "Liberal Democrat MPs make no apologies for sticking up for their constituents' interests and raising the failures of Surrey County Council, whether it is SEND provision, safeguarding, adult social care or potholes.

"No Surrey MP mentioned SEND in Parliament before 2024. They were all Conservative. As soon Liberal Democrats were

elected in 2024 we relentlessly focused on making people's lives easier in Surrey – as we were elected to do. We hope the Leader of Surrey will work with us in trying to achieve that instead of his blatant electioneering.”

Opposition councillors also pushed back. Cllr Paul Follows said he was “bored of the ‘let’s not be political’ speeches followed by a version of ‘everything is fine and nothing is broken’.” He acknowledged Cllr Oliver’s desire for a professional approach to the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) but said implying scrutiny from MPs or councillors was “unwelcome” and “simply a waste of everybody’s time.”

Clashes continue

The debate quickly turned into a wider clash over finances and priorities. Liberal Democrat councillors questioned whether the council’s debt levels and budget planning were as secure as Cllr Oliver claimed, while Cllr George Potter described the leader as “thin-skinned” and accused him of dodging accountability by apparently “cancelling elections”.

Despite the tension, Cllr Oliver called for a focus on collaboration across party lines. “Residents don’t want to get caught in the crossfire of politics,” he said. “They want their elected representatives to improve their lives, not score points.”

As Surrey approaches its first Unitary Council elections in May, the row highlights the delicate balance between navigating political rivalries and council staff reputation, all while preparing for a major shake-up of local government. By the time Surrey’s County Council meets again, the political map will look very different.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Local LibDem leader slams Helen Maguire MP in shock resignation

19 March 2026



In a shock development in the politics of Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrat Council Group Leader Cllr **James Lawrence** (College Ward) has resigned from his Party and joined the growing Independent Group on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

The Independent Group, led by former Residents Association Councillor **Alex Coley** (Ruxley), has been joined by ex-LibDem and long serving Councillor **Julie Morris** (College) and former Residents Association Councillor for Nonsuch Ward, **Christine Howells**.

The Liberal Democrats once formed the largest opposition group on the Council. Now the group is the smallest. The Independent Group has four councillors, Labour four and the Liberal Democrats just two.

The first version of this report overlooked the little known fact that Cllr **Chris Watson** (Ewell Court) defected from the RA to Labour on 10th February this year.

The Residents Association remain predominant with the remainder of the total 35 seats in the Chamber.

In Cllr James Lawrence’s resignation letter he takes wounding Parthian shots at both Epsom and Ewell’s first woman and first Liberal Democrat MP **Helen Maguire**, who was elected in the July 2024 General Election and her Party’s leader. He pulls no punches in his critique of Sir **Ed Davey**, MP for Kingston-Upon-Thames.

Resignation letter of Cllr James Lawrence

Dear Resident

I joined the Liberal Democrats in 2018 because I believed that the Party had both the strong intellectual foundations Britain needs and the pragmatism to achieve them. A principled commitment to liberalism, socially responsible markets, and devolved power differentiated the Liberal Democrats from other parties. Moreover, the Party’s understanding that it existed to influence politics from the outside by winning public support for important issues was tried and tested.

In 2023, I decided to play an active role in this mission and stood for election. I was fortunate enough to win and become a councillor representing College Ward. Serving the community where I grew up has been a great privilege. I’m proud to

have co-led a cross-party coalition working for better outcomes at the Chalk Pit site, increased Council lease scrutiny, and passed a motion requiring all urgent council decisions to be published. Navigating an overly complex housing payments system to keep a roof over the head of a vulnerable resident is an experience that will stay with me.

While I have been doing all I can to serve our community, I have unfortunately been undermined by both the national and local Liberal Democrats Party. Under Ed Davey's leadership, the Party has become rudderless. What do the Liberal Democrats stand for? I wish I could tell you. Davey's Mr. Tumble-style stunts cover up a lack of direction, policy, and commitment to seriously engage with the challenges this country faces, particularly the economy. As the two-party system collapses, the Liberal Democrats should stand to benefit. But Davey's Party is incapable of taking advantage, and given its purposelessness, that's probably a good thing.

Locally, I have been disappointed with our Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament who seems more interested in leafleting and electioneering than engaging in meaningful policy change at the national level. Having worked with the MP closely on local matters, I am also concerned by her ability to alienate volunteers who freely give up their time. While I was pleased to support the successful campaign to displace the Conservatives in Epsom and Ewell, I now feel a sense of guilt at having played a role in enabling her to be elected.

For these reasons, I am resigning from the Liberal Democrat Party with immediate effect. I sincerely hope that the Party returns to the seriousness of its past, but I unfortunately no longer have faith it will. I will continue to serve the people of College Ward and the Borough to the best of my ability as an Independent councillor.

James Lawrence

In response Helen Maguire has issued the following statement:

I understand that Cllr James Lawrence has decided to step away from the Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrats and will finish his term as an independent.

While I wish him well in his future endeavours, I am saddened to see his portrayal of my values and priorities as a Member of Parliament working for local matters at a national level.

The feedback I receive from local residents is consistently positive. I frequently receive correspondence from constituents who value the regular literature they are sent informing them of the important work I am conducting in Parliament. It is equally vital to me that constituents know how accessible and visible I am as their MP, engaging with them on their doorsteps each week. It is because I am an MP who strives to be a truly present voice within Epsom and Ewell that I am able to understand these concerns and raise them at a national level.

I recently met a constituent during one of my canvassing sessions, who told me that they were having difficulties accessing a breast cancer drug. I raised this issue directly with the responsible Minister, who then intervened with our local NHS organisation, and consequently the constituent received their medication. I do not need to debate the merits of consistent canvassing when the importance of it is so clear in cases such as this.

I am proud to be a very visible and active Member of Parliament within the Epsom and Ewell community, and will continue to fight for every single one of my constituents at both a local and national level.

Helen Maguire MP

Sam Jones - Reporter



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New moped bays introduced to tackle pavement parking in Epsom High Street

19 March 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council have established new moped-only parking spaces outside the Town Hall in a bid to combat pavement parking on Epsom High Street.

The issue of delivery riders mounting kerbs outside fast-food restaurants has been a cause of significant concern for residents and visitors in recent years. Vehicles blocking pavements create serious safety risks for pedestrians, particularly wheelchair users, those with visual impairments, and parents with prams and pushchairs.

The bays are the latest measure in the council's multi-agency approach to the problem. Motions have been successfully passed at both Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and Surrey County Council calling for dedicated motorcycle parking at all new retail and takeaway developments, the introduction of "round-table" discussions with delivery apps such as Uber Eats and Deliveroo, and stronger enforcement of parking regulations.

The Epsom Business Improvement District (Go Epsom) is also working directly with restaurants and delivery riders to promote the use of these dedicated bays as a faster and legal alternative to pavement parking.

The local initiative coincides with a significant national policy shift. On 8 January 2026, the Department for Transport responded to a long-awaited consultation, announcing new powers for local authorities to tackle pavement parking more effectively.

Unlike the previous street-by-street approach, which was often slow and costly to implement, the new secondary legislation will allow councils to enforce against "unnecessary obstruction" more easily.

Councillor **Steven McCormick**, (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Planning Committee and a member of Surrey County Council's Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee, said:

"Pavements are for people, not for motorised shortcuts. We've heard from residents who have been forced into the road because the footway is entirely blocked. We are committed to making the High Street safe for everyone. The new moped bays that Epsom & Ewell have provided will mean there is no longer any excuse for this unacceptable and inconsiderate parking."

"I also welcome the announcement of new powers from the Department for Transport. As soon as this national legislation is fully enacted, I will be pushing Surrey County Council to implement a new Traffic Regulation Order specifically designed to curb pavement parking across the borough.

"This TRO will provide the 'teeth' that enforcement officers have lacked, allowing them to issue civil penalties."

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council



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Epsom and Ewell Council transparency row erupts as council backs publication of urgent decisions

19 March 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has agreed to improve transparency over so-called “urgent decisions” following a heated debate that revisited the controversy surrounding the Rainbow Centre and allegations of secrecy over a £500,000 liability.

At its Full Council meeting on 12th March, councillors voted to support a motion calling for a clearer and more timely system for publishing decisions taken by officers under delegated authority.

The move follows months of criticism over how urgent decisions have been handled and disclosed, culminating in disputes over a confidential document linked to the Rainbow Centre.

Motion seeks clearer publication of decisions

The motion, proposed by Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) and seconded by Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), called for a formal process to ensure that officer decisions are properly recorded and made publicly accessible.

Lawrence told councillors that while urgent decisions are currently noted in committee papers, the underlying decision notices themselves are not published in a timely or transparent way. “The decision notice itself isn’t given... that is not at all in the same timeframe as a decision notice from committee,” he said. He added that in the past it could take months, or even up to a year, for such decisions to be reported.

The motion proposed that the Chief Executive develop a process for publishing these decisions, with an update to be reported back to council later in the year.

Legal compliance questioned

The debate turned on whether the council is already complying with transparency laws. Lawrence said the current arrangements were “legally questionable”, pointing to regulations requiring a written record of officer decisions to be produced “as soon as reasonably practicable”.

However, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol), chair of the Standards and Constitution Committee, rejected claims that the council was acting unlawfully. He told the meeting that the council’s existing practice - recording urgent decisions in committee agendas and reporting them annually - complied with the regulations. “The custom and practice of this council... satisfies this requirement,” he said.

The Mayor also intervened to clarify that officers believed no law had been broken.

Rainbow Centre controversy looms over debate

The discussion was heavily influenced by the ongoing controversy surrounding the Rainbow Centre, where an urgent decision was used to deal with issues linked to the site.

That episode has been the subject of previous reporting by the Epsom & Ewell Times, including concerns about a secret document referring to substantial potential dilapidation costs - reported to be in the region of £500,000.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) directly linked the motion to that issue, accusing the council of a broader lack of transparency. “We’ve had an ongoing shambles over the so-called urgent decision over the Rainbow Centre,” he said.

He alleged that key information had not been disclosed and suggested there had been no intention to publish the document. “The reality is... there was never any intention to publish the document in the first place,” he said. Ames also described what he called a “growing transparency crisis” within the council.

Since 20th January Epsom and Ewell Times has awaited disclosure from Epsom and Ewell Borough Council of information that will throw light on the Rainbow Centre controversy. Despite a 20 day legal limit under the Freedom of Information Act to disclose and our concession to accept delay where some items sought may take longer to find, we have received no disclosures of even readily available information.

Calls for greater openness

Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), who seconded the motion, said he had been investigating urgent decisions since discovering their limited visibility several years ago. “I accidentally discovered that they exist,” he said. He told councillors that hundreds of historic officer decisions had not been publicly disclosed, including some involving significant financial commitments. “Some of them record millions of pounds being spent... even non-exempt information has been

withheld as a matter of course," he said.

Coley said progress had been made in recent years, but argued further reform was needed to ensure proper compliance and public confidence.

Cross-party engagement leads to compromise

Despite the sharp exchanges, the motion itself reflected a degree of cross-party cooperation. Both Lawrence and Coley acknowledged that they had worked with Councillor Beckett and officers to reach a compromise. Beckett, in turn, thanked them for their "time and patience" in developing the proposal.

The agreed approach stops short of declaring the current system unlawful, instead tasking the Chief Executive with designing an improved publication process.

Motion carried by council

The motion was approved by councillors, signalling a clear intention to increase transparency over urgent and delegated decisions. It requires the council to develop a system for publishing decisions in a more accessible and timely way, subject to the usual rules on confidential or exempt information. An update on progress is expected later in the year.

Wider implications

The debate highlights continuing concerns about governance and transparency at the council during its final years before abolition under Surrey's local government reorganisation.

The Rainbow Centre episode appears to have acted as a catalyst for change, bringing the issue of urgent decisions into sharper public focus.

While the council maintains it has acted within the law, the adoption of the motion suggests a recognition that existing arrangements have not met public expectations. As one councillor put it during the debate, the issue is not only legality but trust.

With further major decisions expected before the transition to a new unitary authority, the way those decisions are recorded and disclosed is likely to remain under close scrutiny.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell Council put in proportion

19 March 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved changes to the political balance of its committees following further shifts in councillor allegiances, amid continuing tensions within the ruling Residents' Association group.

The decision, taken at Full Council on 12 March, reflects the latest change in group composition after another RA councillor, **Christine Howells** (Nonsuch), moved to sit as an independent.

The adjustment of committee seats - known as proportionality - is a routine requirement when political group numbers change. However, the debate revealed deeper concerns about control, transparency and internal stability within the council.

Rebalancing committees after defections

Introducing the report, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) said the changes were necessary to reflect the council's evolving political makeup. "As a result of changes within the political representation within this council, there has been a need to review the proportionality sitting on committees," he told members.

The revised allocations had been agreed between group leaders and were presented for formal approval by the full council.

Councillors approved the updated distribution of seats, ensuring that representation on committees broadly reflects the current balance of political groups.

Dispute over whether seats belong to parties or individuals

The debate exposed a technical but significant disagreement about whether committee places belong to political parties or to individual councillors.

Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) argued that while parties are allocated seats proportionately, it is the council that appoints individuals to those positions. "It is not the party being appointed, it is the person," he said, adding that councillors who change political group should not automatically lose their place on committees.

He pointed to examples in the report where individuals had been nominated to seats allocated to a particular party, suggesting this supported his interpretation.

But Councillor **Rachel King** (RA, Town) rejected that view, insisting that committee places are fundamentally party allocations. "Seats are for parties, not for people," she said, adding that parties retain the right to nominate replacements if councillors change allegiance. She said the arrangements had been agreed by group leaders and urged councillors to support the proposals.

Tensions over substitutions and control

The issue of substitutions - where councillors stand in for others at meetings - also proved contentious. Opposition councillors criticised what they described as inconsistent or politically motivated handling of substitutions following recent defections.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) said the situation had become "farcical", alleging that rules were being stretched to maintain control. "The clique that runs this council has a special talent for alienating members... bending the rules," he said. He linked the proportionality changes to wider political instability, suggesting the Residents' Association group was "bleeding members".

The debate reflects a broader struggle over influence as the RA group's long-standing dominance of the council comes under increasing pressure.

Background: shifting political landscape

The latest changes follow defections from the Residents' Association group over recent months, with councillors moving to sit as independents or aligning with opposition groups. The departure of **Christine Howells** (Independent Nonsuch) from the Residents' Association further alters the balance, reducing the RA group's numbers and requiring another recalculation of committee representation.

Under local government law, councils must ensure that committee seats are allocated in proportion to the size of political groups, as far as practicable. This means that each defection can trigger a reshuffle of committee places and, potentially, influence over key decisions.

Vote confirms new balance

Councillors approved the revised proportionality arrangements, including updated committee memberships.

A separate vote on one recommendation - relating to specific appointments - was carried by 15 votes to eight, with four abstentions, indicating some continuing division within the chamber.

Despite the disagreements aired during the debate, the council formally adopted the new structure, bringing committee representation into line with the current political balance.

Ongoing instability ahead of reorganisation

The debate highlights a council in a degree of political flux as it approaches both local elections and the planned abolition of the borough under Surrey's local government reorganisation.

With further changes in group membership still possible, additional reviews of proportionality may be required in the coming months.

The shifting balance of power on committees could prove significant in the council's final year, particularly as it continues to make decisions on major issues before handing over responsibilities to the new unitary authority in 2027.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom's empty and second homes face local tax increases

19 March 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved a 2.98% increase in its share of Council Tax for 2026/27, alongside new measures to penalise empty properties and second homes, but not without some questioning from councillors over the purpose and clarity of the changes. (Strategy and Resources Committee 27th January.) The increase equates to £6.93 a year for a Band D household, keeping within the government's referendum limit and adding around 58p per month to bills. While modest in isolation, the rise sits within a wider package aimed at strengthening council finances and aligning local policy with other Surrey authorities ahead of the planned move to unitary government.

The more contentious element of the decision was the tightening of rules on empty homes and second properties. From April 2026, owners of empty and unfurnished properties will no longer receive a one-month exemption and will face a 100% Council Tax premium after one year, effectively doubling their bill. From April 2027, the same 100% premium will apply to second homes. Introducing the policy, Committee Chair Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) said: "It's something that the rest of the boroughs and districts in Surrey are already doing... coming up to unitary it's now proposed that we do it and align ourselves ready for the unity proposal."

Although the measures were approved unanimously, several councillors probed the reasoning and operation of the policy. Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) questioned whether the changes were primarily about raising income or achieving social outcomes such as reducing homelessness and increasing housing supply, asking whether the Council was "trying to achieve any of those things, or is it simply about... increasing the income that we get." In response, Cllr Dallen indicated the policy served both purposes, noting that while the number of empty homes locally is limited, "every property is another family home," and officers confirmed that bringing homes back into use remains an objective.

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) also raised detailed questions about how the policy would work in practice, particularly the rules around when a property is considered occupied and how time limits on empty status are reset. He highlighted potential ambiguity in the wording of the policy documents, suggesting that the distinction between a property being "substantially furnished" and actually occupied could lead to confusion. While confirming his support for the policy in principle, he sought reassurance that the expected income—estimated at around £29,000—would exceed the administrative cost of implementing the scheme.

The discussion reflected a broader concern among some members about balancing financial necessity with fairness and clarity. While there was no outright opposition to the proposals, the debate revealed differing emphases: some councillors focused on revenue generation and alignment with Surrey-wide practice, while others stressed the importance of ensuring the policy delivers genuine housing benefits and is clearly understood by residents.

In the end, the committee approved the recommendations without dissent, confirming both the Council Tax increase and the new premiums on empty and second homes as part of the authority's budget-setting process for the coming financial year.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey-wide plan aims to get thousands back into work

19 March 2026



A cross-county plan to bring thousands of people back into employment in Surrey has received backing from Surrey County Council and government ministers.

The Get Surrey Working Plan brings together key partners to support 26,900 economically inactive residents who want to work but currently face barriers to employment.

Although Surrey has a lower-than-average economic inactivity rate of 17.8% compared to the national average of 21.2%, around 131,000 working-age residents are not currently employed.

Government ministers and local leaders from across government, Jobcentre Plus, health services and business have pledged to work together to tackle the issue through a range of interventions. These include multi-million pound schemes such as Connect to Work, Skills Bootcamps and WorkWell.

A new online Skills, Training and Employment Portal, known as STEP Surrey, will provide streamlined access to services, helping residents find support, gain skills, secure employment or access assistance more easily.

The plan was formally launched by representatives from the One Surrey Growth Board at Redhill Jobcentre Plus.

It identifies key reasons why many working-age residents are not in employment, including long-term health conditions and caring responsibilities.

The plan also addresses a mismatch in skills, where many highly skilled professionals commute to London, leaving local employers struggling to fill vacancies. Sectors such as health and social care, automotive and technology are particularly affected.

To address this, the plan will deliver targeted business support and skills development programmes, helping employers fill vacancies while supporting workforce planning and more inclusive employment practices.

The soon-to-be devolved Adult Skills Fund will focus on priority sectors and identified skills gaps, enabling residents to gain qualifications aligned with local employer needs.

Young people without access to skills or further learning will receive early intervention support in schools, reducing the risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET), with clearer vocational pathways and work experience opportunities.

Matt Furniss, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth and Chair of the One Surrey Growth Board, said: "While the economic picture in Surrey is largely a positive one, we know that there are thousands of people out there who are currently out of work but not in employment.

"Through the Get Surrey Working, we're committed to breaking down those barriers and creating a truly inclusive labour market where everyone has the opportunity to access good quality employment and reach their full potential."

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Pat McFadden, said: "The Get Surrey Working Plan is a perfect example of how partners can come together to support people into work and help local businesses find the talent they need.

"Surrey is a county with real strengths - a thriving economy, top-class businesses and talented people - yet we know there are many more people who want to work but face barriers that hold them back.

"By bringing together local employers and support services we can reach people where they are and give them a genuine route into good work. This kind of practical, locally-led support is exactly what we need to get Britain working."

The plan has been developed through partnership working with public health teams, Jobcentre Plus, Surrey Chambers of Commerce, employment support providers and other stakeholders.

Its aim is to avoid duplication of services and ensure support reaches those who need it most, by coordinating

employment and skills provision across Surrey into a clear, joined-up local offer.

Residents can access employment and skills support through the STEP Surrey portal at www.stepsurrey.co.uk

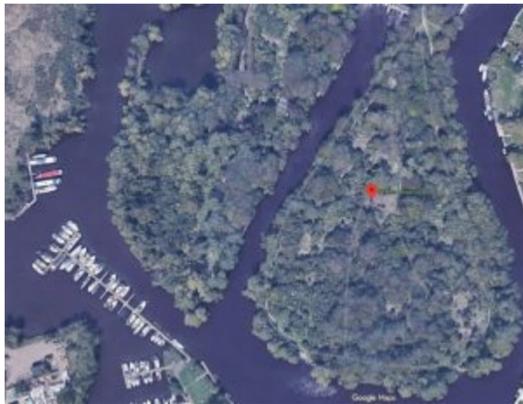
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Representatives from the Surrey Growth Board launch the Get Surrey Working Plan

Ash dieback keeps Thames island closed

19 March 2026



The Environment Agency has warned against any planned protests over the closure of a Surrey riverside island and announced a public engagement event to update residents on safety work there.

Penton Hook Island has been shut since July 2025 after diseased trees were discovered across the site. Officials say the trees are affected by ash dieback, a disease that rots them from the inside and makes them unstable and unpredictable to cut down. As a result of the scale and complexity of the work required the island cannot safely reopen yet, officials said.

The agency has warned people not to attempt to access the island amid reports of possible protests around the site. A spokesperson said: "We would like to remind everyone that access to the island is currently prohibited due to the significant safety concerns resulting from diseased trees. Please do not attempt to access the island."

Ash dieback weakens trees internally, meaning they can collapse or drop branches without warning. The Environment Agency said this creates a serious risk to both workers and the public, with falling branches, collapsing trunks and debris on the ground posing a potential injury hazard.

Local residents will have a chance to discuss the plans at a public engagement event on March 20, 2026, at Staines Library between 2pm and 5pm.

Environment Agency staff will provide an update on the work and hear feedback from the community. People will also be able to share information about memorials located on the island so they can be protected where it is safe to do so.

A spokesperson added: "Keeping the public safe is one of our priorities and we apologise for any inconvenience this closure may be causing. We know the importance of this site to the local community, and we are committed to keeping everyone updated on our progress."

Instead of using standard chainsaws, specialist mechanical equipment will be needed to remove the affected trees, the Environment Agency said. The machinery will have to be transported to the island by river, adding further logistical challenges.

The agency said additional work will also be required to strengthen parts of the island bank before equipment can be brought in.

Seasonal wildlife restrictions are another factor. The bird nesting season, which runs from March to September, limits when some work can take place, further complicating the project.

Plans are also being explored to restore the island once the dangerous trees have been cleared. Environment Agency officials said they hope to replace the diseased trees with new species better suited to the island's ecology.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Penton Hook Island - Google Maps

Support programme launched to help Surrey's high

streets

19 March 2026



Dedicated support for high street businesses across Surrey to attract new customers, boost sales and drive growth is now available as part of wider efforts to strengthen and futureproof town centres.

The Surrey High Street Growth and Innovation Programme is open to a wide range of businesses, including independent retailers, start-ups, market traders, charities and social enterprises.

Funded by Surrey County Council's Economic Growth Fund and delivered by specialists Smarter Society and The Retail Group, the scheme offers free practical workshops, online resources and one-to-one tailored support.

There is a particular focus on 22 high streets across all 11 district and borough areas in Surrey, with targeted workshops designed to help businesses attract more customers, increase footfall, improve visibility and boost customer spend.

Businesses can register for support directly via the programme's enrolment form.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth at Surrey County Council, said: "High streets are the lifeblood of our communities. They're integral to the character and vitality of our towns and villages, which is why we're committed to supporting them alongside our district and borough partners and Business Improvement Districts.

"This programme is a real investment in the people behind Surrey's independent businesses, giving them the tools and knowledge to thrive - which is good for our economy, our residents and our communities."

The scheme has been developed in collaboration with economic development teams from district and borough councils, alongside representatives from Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) across Surrey.

Launched last month, the programme includes workshops running through February, March and April at key locations across the county.

The Smarter Society outreach team is already engaging directly with businesses on Surrey's high streets, meeting hundreds of owners face-to-face and signing retailers up for workshops.

Four free workshops are being held in each district and borough, covering practical topics such as increasing footfall, improving online and in-store visibility, making better use of social media and promotions, and planning for growth.

Workshops are also being streamed live online, with recordings available on demand.

In addition, a range of free toolkits, guides, templates and short videos is available via the Business Surrey website, alongside one-to-one support for businesses with more specific needs.

In the first few weeks of the programme, nearly 140 businesses have registered, with 75 already receiving support across five areas.

Geoff Baxter, Managing Director of Smarter Society, said: "The Surrey High Street Growth & Innovation Programme is gaining real momentum. Businesses across the county are engaging enthusiastically with our on-street support and workshops, and we're proud to see such strong early signs of growth and innovation on Surrey's high streets."

The programme is free and open to any business trading on a Surrey high street. Further information is available via the Business Surrey High Streets page, with direct registration also available through the programme's enrolment form.

Surrey County Council



Photo: Reps from Surrey CC, Smarter Society and Hello Dorking mark the delivery of the High Street Support scheme

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The big child smartphone use debate starts in Surrey

19 March 2026



Parents are facing “no bigger issue” than the impact of smartphones and social media on their children, says Godalming and Ash MP Jeremy Hunt.

The former chancellor told a public meeting in Godalming that his own family are now also “in the thick of it”, debating whether to allow their kids to have smartphones and social media.

Doctors, teachers, parents and politicians gathered at Wilfred Noyce Community Centre in Godalming on March 13 to discuss concerns around children using smartphones and social media, and whether there should be a ban for under-16s.

The discussion forms part of ongoing work with the campaign group Smartphone Free Childhood Surrey, which have been working with Mr Hunt and other local campaigners to raise awareness on the impact smartphones might be having on young people’s learning and wellbeing.

Concern is growing among parents, carers and educators that smartphones are disrupting classrooms, compromising safety and chipping away at children’s mental health. Evidence shared at the meeting suggested only around 11 per cent of schools are currently smartphone-free, despite research indicating pupils in such schools can achieve GCSE results one to two grades higher.

Audience members also heard stark anecdotal evidence from a frontline healthcare professional in a statement she sent to be read at the meeting. Consultant paediatrician Dr Louise Mills described several cases she had treated linked to online trends and cyberbullying. They included a 14-year-old admitted after suffering a seizure while attempting a TikTok challenge, and an 11-year-old who suffered life-changing burns after copying something seen online. Another 14-year-old patient took their own life following sustained cyberbullying.

GP Susie Davies, founder of the charity PAPAYA (Parents Against Phone Addiction in Young Adults), said young people were experiencing a “mental health epidemic”.

She said teenagers now spend on average two to three hours a day on social media (some spend more than five) exposing them to constant comparison and harmful content.

“The tech is addictive by design,” she said. “It is structured with dopamine reward pathways which the teenage brain is particularly vulnerable to.”

Ms Davies told the community centre that problematic phone use makes young people more likely to experience depression. She added that children are missing out on sleep, real-world experiences and face-to-face friendships, with some even suffering trauma after viewing disturbing content online.

Shadow education secretary Laura Trott MP told the audience smartphones and social media were “not safe for our young people”. She argued schools should remove smartphones from classrooms and ensure technology is only used when it has proven educational value.

The MP for Sevenoaks, Swanley and the Dartford Villages said: “We’ve sleepwalked into the overuse of screens in schools to the detriment of education.”

Leader of Waverley Conservatives Councillor Jane Austin said: “As a mum of four, I’ve seen directly the impact smartphones and social media can have on children. A number of Surrey schools have already adopted no-smartphone policies, and the evidence is clear that this helps children focus and achieve better outcomes.

“If elected to run West and East Surrey, Conservatives will work to ensure all Surrey schools are smartphone-free so that children can learn without constant digital distraction.”

Some Year 11s in the audience raised the issue that some children might get VPNs to work round the social media ban, or might find other ways to source smartphones. “We have bans on alcohol and cigarettes for children,” she said. “They’re not 100 per cent perfect but they exist because those things are harmful. The same is true for social media.”

Campaigners from the group Smartphone Free Childhood also called for cultural change, arguing that delaying children’s first smartphone until at least 16 could dramatically improve attention spans, wellbeing and learning.

Headteacher Adam Samson said his school, Godalming Junior, already requires pupils to hand in phones at the start of the day, with Year 6 pupils sometimes allowed a simple “brick phone”. The policy has reduced cyberbullying incidents to zero, he said.

“Once children have a smartphone, they always have one,” he said. “We’re simply delaying it and giving them more time



to be children.”

Emily Dalton LDRS