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Surrey County Council attempts to regulate use of AI

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Surrey County Council has adopted its first ever formal policy on artificial intelligence, which aims to regulate the council's use of the "fast moving" new technology.

The council's inaugural AI policy was developed following a motion in September 2025 calling on the authority to draw one up to address the risks posed by the tech's exponential growth.

It sets out a number of rules and safeguards around the council's use of AI – including that any AI tool used must first be authorised for use by the local authority.

Councillors and officers will not be allowed to use AI software that is accessed via the internet – such as Gemini or ChatGPT – over data security fears. Instead, anyone using AI for council business must do so in a way that is "safe, ethical, lawful and appropriate", the policy sets out.

Introducing the policy, Councillor David Lewis (Conservative: Cobham) said: "On the one hand, we do want to make sure that we operate AI in a safe and responsible manner. But at the same time, we have to make sure that we have the right safeguards in place."

He added: "We have to be careful that we don't put so many controls in place that we actually impede and hinder our use of AI going forward, providing that's done in a responsible way."

The policy lists a set of criteria for when AI use would or would not be appropriate for use in council business – with administrative assistance and data analysis listed among the approved tasks for AI assistance.

Conversely, removing human oversight from decisions that affect residents, unfair discrimination and generating misleading information with the help of AI are prohibited under the policy.

Any AI use that breaches data protection, confidentiality or security rules will also be banned, as well as using any tools that have not received council approval.

The policy further sets out that any breaches of the rules would be treated as misconduct, which could lead to disciplinary action or dismissal for employees and "contractual consequences" for other contractors or agency workers.

It also calls for the environmental impact of artificial intelligence to be given "due regard" during the procurement of AI tools.

Addressing this point, Councillor Jonathan Essex (Green Party: Redhill East) said: "The increase in energy use through AI threatens the UK's climate targets – and that's threatened at a local level as well as at a national level."

Surrey County Council will cease to exist from April 2027, at which point its responsibilities will be taken on by the two new unitary councils in West Surrey and East Surrey.

To this end, the county council is recommending that these new councils adopt its artificial intelligence policy for themselves – while also remaining open to adapting it as the burgeoning tech continues to be developed.

Councillor Lewis said this recommendation to West and East Surrey councils comes "because this is such a fast moving area", while adding: "We also recommend that it should be reviewed and updated at least on an annual basis."

He said: "What is appropriate for today might not be appropriate in 12 months' time."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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