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Surrey County Council celebrates 138 years – but is this the time for a farewell party?

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Surrey County Council is preparing to celebrate its 138-year history with a programme of exhibitions, events and archive displays, just as it enters the final 138 days of its existence.

The coincidence of 138 years and 138 remaining days, starting tomorrow, has provided the inspiration for a campaign entitled *Celebrating Surrey County Council*, launched ahead of the authority's abolition on 1 April 2027.

But while few would dispute the importance of preserving Surrey's local government history, the initiative raises a question of priorities. With the County Council facing the substantial task of transferring its responsibilities to two new authorities, and continuing pressure on public services and finances, is this the moment to devote staff time and public resources to celebrating an anniversary that is hardly a conventional milestone?

Unlike a silver, golden or diamond jubilee, a 138th anniversary would not ordinarily be a cause for special celebration. The significance of the number lies not in the anniversary itself but in the approaching disappearance of the institution.

For Surrey County Council, however, the campaign offers an opportunity to remind residents of its achievements before it passes into history.

A travelling exhibition

The centrepiece will be an exhibition developed in collaboration with the Surrey History Centre, featuring photographs, documents and stories drawn from the council's archives.

The exhibition will explore how the authority has responded to changing social needs and challenges since its establishment in 1889, including developments in education, public health, transport, social care and environmental protection.

It will be launched at Guildford Library on Thursday 3 December 2026, between 2pm and 3pm, before touring libraries across Surrey until March 2027.

The Council also promises a programme of events and historical material highlighting the contribution of generations of councillors, employees and partner organisations.

For local historians, the exercise may be especially worthwhile. The archives of a county council spanning nearly a century and a half offer a record of changing communities, public expectations and the development of services now taken for granted.

Preserving and sharing that material is a legitimate public function, particularly when the institution responsible for creating it is about to disappear.

A legacy to be proud of?

Surrey County Council Leader Tim Oliver said:

"Surrey County Council has a record to be proud of. Since its establishment in 1889, the council has played a central role in shaping the county, helping to improve education and public health, develop transport networks, support vulnerable residents, protect our countryside and preserve Surrey's rich heritage. Generations of councillors, staff and partners have worked together to make a lasting difference to communities across Surrey.

"As we prepare for local government reorganisation, this campaign gives us an opportunity to reflect on those achievements and celebrate the people behind them."

Cllr Oliver also pointed to what he described as the Council's strong legacy, including balanced finances, improved inspections of adult and children's services, investment through Your Fund Surrey and improvements to infrastructure.

He said:

"Importantly, we are passing on a strong legacy. In recent years we have transformed the council's finances to deliver a stable, balanced budget, achieved 'Good' ratings for both Adults' and Children's Services, invested tens of millions of pounds in local communities through Your Fund Surrey, and continued to improve infrastructure and services for

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residents. We have strong foundations, a talented workforce and high-performing services that will help ensure a positive future for local government in Surrey."

Those achievements will form part of the Council's own assessment of its place in history. Whether future historians and residents arrive at quite the same verdict is another matter.

A balanced historical account might also examine the difficulties, controversies and shortcomings encountered during 138 years of public administration, as well as the successes.

A curious moment for celebration

The timing is particularly striking because Surrey County Council is not preparing for another chapter in its own institutional history. It is preparing for its dissolution.

Under the Surrey (Structural Changes) Order 2026, the County Council and Surrey's 11 borough and district councils will be abolished on 1 April 2027. Their functions will pass to East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council.

Epsom and Ewell will become part of East Surrey, alongside Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Reigate and Banstead and Tandridge.

The new councils were elected in May 2026 and are already undertaking the considerable work required to assume responsibility for education, highways, social care, waste services, planning and the other functions currently divided between county and district authorities.

Against that background, even a relatively modest commemorative programme invites scrutiny of the resources involved.

The Council's announcement does not specify a budget for the campaign, the costs of preparing and touring the exhibition, or the amount of officer time being devoted to it. That does not establish that the expenditure is substantial or unreasonable. Much of the work may be undertaken using existing archives, exhibition facilities and staff resources.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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