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Surrey County Council staff strike poll

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Staff at **Surrey County Council** are voting on whether to go on strike after receiving a revised pay offer which union bosses say is not good enough.

Union chiefs representing workers, including teachers and firefighters, have described the ballot as one of the most important in the branch's history and that it was time to make a stand against low pay.

The ballot papers were sent out to staff on May 7 and run until June 4 – when staff will decide whether to accept the council's revised offer or support the walk out.

Surrey County Council leader, Councillor **Tim Oliver** (Conservative) said it was important the authority "lived within its means" and that the offer was final. He said the council remained committed to getting the matter resolved so staff could receive pay increases as soon as possible.

Surrey Pay comprises pay bands PS1/2 to PS14 and pay bands for senior managers PS15 to Chief Executive. The council's original offer of between £1,124 to £1,682 for grades PS3-PS9, was overwhelmingly rejected. Unions had been asking for a £3,500 increase across the board.

In March, workers warned the local authority of a potential walkout after a "record number" of people backed strike action – unless there was a significantly improved pay offer. The council came back and is now offering a £1,800 increase to all staff on PS6 and below, unions have said. Those on between PS7 and PS10 are still on the old deals. Sick pay will return to six months full pay and six months half pay, double its current levels.

Lead negotiator **Paul Couchman** has said this shows the council can be moved. He said: "This is going to be one of the most important votes in our UNISON branch history. The council has already shown that we can move them. We believe we can get a better, fairer, offer if we get a result in this ballot.

"Last year we were just 40 votes short of reaching the legal minimum of 50 per cent of members voting. This is the year we make a stand."

Earlier this year a consultative online ballot was held with 53 per cent of members responding, 87 per cent of whom voted to reject the offer and 91 per cent saying they would support strike action if there wasn't a significantly improved offer.

The Strike Committee felt the council has not moved far enough and has moved to a full postal legal strike ballot. The two general trade unions representing employees said members were being left behind – both national pay awards as well as most other local councils.

According to the unions about a thirds of Surrey staff are paid below a 'minimum standard of income', based on research provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The revised offer would see the lowest hourly rate of pay would be £12.04, higher than both the Real Living Wage and Statutory National Living Wage.

Unison is asking its members to reject the offer.

It comes as, last February, there was a "catastrophic" Surrey payroll glitch that left workers unable to pay mortgages or afford food for their children "We really do deserve better," a statement from Unison read.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council: "We have made a revised improved final offer and remain committed to getting the matter resolved so that our staff can receive their pay increase as soon as possible. However it's imperative that the offer is within our means.

"The council is not immune to the challenges of the current economic landscape, rising costs and inflation pressures, and we must ensure we remain in a position to deliver vital public services and protect our most vulnerable in our communities throughout."

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