

Surrey's declining birth rate means fewer school classes

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Surrey's falling birth rate has led to nearly 50 fewer classes of school children in less than a decade. That is according to a new strategy report aimed at protecting the future of local schools.

Cabinet members agreed to publish an updated Sustainability Strategy for Schools on February 24. The strategy sets out how Surrey County Council will work with headteachers, academy trusts and dioceses to respond to declining pupil rolls and growing financial pressure.

The figures behind the decision are sobering. Births in Surrey have dropped by 21 per cent since 2012, from 14,237 to 11,244 in 2024. Reception numbers have fallen by 11 per cent since 2016, equivalent to around 47 classes across the county.

Presenting the report, Cllr Helyn Clack, cabinet member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said schools remain "at the heart of our communities" but are facing significant strain from lower birth rates, shifting parental preference for schools and tighter budgets.

"These pressures affect schools of every size and type," members were told. "Many leaders and governing bodies are having to make difficult decisions to sustain high-quality provision."

Schools are funded largely on a per-pupil basis, meaning fewer children directly translates into less money. While some parts of Surrey, particularly areas with new housing, are still seeing demand for places, others are experiencing sharp falls in numbers.

The county council leader, Tim Oliver, described the statistics as "quite stark", pointing out that although Surrey saw families move in during and after the pandemic, the longer-term birth rate decline mirrors the national picture.

Councillors agreed the cost-of-living poses a challenge to the county as it can be quite difficult for families to afford to move to Surrey. On the other hand, Surrey hosts a lot of private schools which are very popular so there is less overall demand for state schools.

Cllr Sinead Mooney warned that decisions about school organisation are among the most sensitive the council makes. "This isn't about a strategy document," she said. "It's about people's local school, their children, and often the heart of their community."

Cllr Mooney urged the council to ensure there is proper engagement with communities at an early stage as "too often there is a perception that options are being shaped before the conversation begins". She said: "Once a school is lost, the impact is often lasting and irreversible."

Cabinet members stressed that closures would only ever be considered as a last resort. Other options the council would explore included partnerships, shared leadership models, federations or reducing admission numbers

Particular concern was raised about small village schools, with councillors urging that decisions must not be driven "solely by financial metrics" but by a full understanding of community impact.

Cllr Clack raised concerns about a local village school in her area: "What was a thriving village school down to 13 pupils and is no longer finding it easier to maintain themselves." She added: "We have to understand that schools are paid per pupil, and if they don't have pupils in their schools then they don't get the funding."

The updated strategy commits the council to early engagement, transparent sharing of data and closer collaboration with schools and trusts. Officers will prioritise maintained schools considered most at risk and work with leaders on tailored solutions.

The council also acknowledged the wider context, including ongoing SEND pressures and looming local government reorganisation, which could reshape Surrey's governance structure in coming years.

Despite the challenges, members emphasised their support for maintaining a broad and varied school offer across urban, suburban and rural areas. The cabinet unanimously endorsed the updated strategy and approved its publication.

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Image - entirely imagined.