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Surrey declares experiment in community engagement a success

29 January 2026



Surrey County Council has endorsed the continuation of its pilot **Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs)**, hailing them as a successful new way of ensuring that "community voices are heard" during the transition to new unitary authorities.

At its Cabinet meeting on 27 January, the Council agreed that the four existing pilot NACs – in Dorking and the Villages, East Elmbridge, Farnham and North Tandridge – should continue operating until the pre-election period in 2026. Cabinet members also backed proposals to share learning from the pilots with the new shadow unitary authorities from May 2026, and to consider expanding the model to one or two further areas.

In a strongly positive Cabinet report, Surrey said the pilots had demonstrated "strong stakeholder engagement and consensus on evidence-based local priorities". All 24 NAC members who responded to the final evaluation survey supported continuation, with 83 per cent reporting a positive impact on their work.

Council Leader **Tim Oliver** (Conservative) described the pilots as proof of what could be achieved "when communities, councils, and partners work even closer together", adding that the NACs had delivered "stronger neighbourhoods" and could be scaled up across Surrey.

Senior figures from health bodies, the voluntary sector and district councils also welcomed the model, with supporters arguing that NACs provide a forum for aligning priorities across councils, the NHS, police, education providers and community organisations at a neighbourhood level.

If you have not already done so we do urge you to take part in the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council consultation on creating new Parish or Community Councils and also the Epsom and Ewell Times reader survey designed to offer wider options for you to express your views on.

EEBC CGR Consultation

Click HERE to access the Epsom and Ewell Times reader survey.

Advisory forums – not elected bodies

However, the Cabinet paper and accompanying statements also underline a key limitation: NACs are **advisory and collaborative bodies**, not democratically elected councils.

Membership varies by area and includes appointed representatives from public bodies and voluntary organisations alongside councillors from existing authorities. While Surrey says this flexibility allows NACs to reflect local circumstances, critics argue it also raises questions about accountability, transparency and duplication – particularly as Surrey moves towards unitary local government.

In Epsom & Ewell no NAC pilot currently operates. Under current proposals, the borough will be represented by **10 elected councillors on the new East Surrey Unitary Authority**, covering a population of more than 80,000 residents. Decisions about neighbourhood-level governance will therefore have to sit alongside – or potentially compete with – a smaller number of unitary councillors holding formal democratic mandates.

Parish councils versus NACs

The NAC model also sits uneasily alongside longer-established forms of local democracy, such as parish and town councils, which are directly elected and have statutory standing.

Several Surrey districts, including parts of Epsom & Ewell, have debated whether the creation of new parish or community councils would provide a clearer, more accountable way of preserving local voice following local government reorganisation. NACs, by contrast, have no independent legal status, no direct electoral mandate and no guaranteed budgetary powers.

Supporters of NACs argue that they are intended to complement, not replace, existing councils and that they are particularly useful during a period of structural change. The Cabinet report stresses their value in identifying shared priorities, coordinating preventative work and encouraging partnership working ahead of the 2026 unitary elections.

Yet the report stops short of explaining how NACs would interact with elected parish councils where these exist – or whether they risk becoming a parallel governance layer once the new unitaries are fully operational.

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A transitional solution?

For now, Surrey's Cabinet appears to see NACs primarily as a transitional mechanism, helping to bridge the gap between the current two-tier system and the new unitary arrangements.

The four pilots ran between July and December 2025, and the decision to extend them only until the pre-election period in 2026 suggests that their long-term role remains unresolved. Expansion to further areas is framed as something to be "considered", rather than guaranteed.

As Surrey moves closer to the creation of East and West Surrey unitary authorities, the key question for places like Epsom & Ewell will be whether neighbourhood engagement is best delivered through appointed partnership forums – or through elected local councils with clearer lines of accountability to residents.

For now, Surrey County Council is celebrating what it describes as a successful experiment. Whether NACs evolve into a permanent feature of local governance, or give way to more traditional democratic structures, is a debate that is only just beginning.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Royal visit to Surrey University

29 January 2026



On 28 January, HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh and the University of Surrey's Chancellor, HRH The Duke of Kent, visited Surrey to celebrate the University's innovation, research and hands on learning. During their visit, they met students and staff from across campus, gaining insight into Surrey's multidisciplinary approach to education.

Medical students at the first and only medical school in Surrey met The Duchess of Edinburgh to demonstrate the collaborative training that will shape their careers in the NHS. The Duchess returned to the University of Surrey's Kate Granger Building six years after she opened it as the home of its School of Health Sciences. Her Royal Highness met some of the University's first cohort of UK government-funded medical students who began their studies in September 2025.

The Duchess also met medical, nursing, midwifery and paramedic students learning together in the collaborative training wards before joining a virtual reality anatomy teaching session.

The University's Chancellor, The Duke of Kent, joined her Royal Highness at the Surrey Space Centre, where they visited labs to see a student-designed satellite deploy pod which will push a payload from a rocket into space.

At the Space Centre, The Duchess visited the satellite clean room toured by Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1998. In the clean room, Her Royal Highness helped to fit a panel engraved with Their Royal Highnesses' Royal Cyphers to Jovian-1, a satellite which Surrey students helped develop.

Schoolchildren who took part in the University's widening participation summer schools returned to campus to show off the hands-on STEM projects they enjoyed last year, with The Duke and Duchess joining in. Students from the University's

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Engineering Design Centre also had the opportunity to show His Royal Highness a range of projects, including rocket designs and Formula E racing cars.

Professor Stephen Jarvis, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Surrey, said:

"Training medical students alongside nursing, midwifery and paramedic students reflects how the NHS operates in practice. Our students graduate already equipped to work effectively in multidisciplinary teams, rather than having to learn this solely once they enter the workplace. The Duchess saw this first-hand in our training wards, where students from different disciplines learn together in realistic clinical settings.

"Her Royal Highness also saw our engineering students working on satellites they have designed and built themselves – hardware that will ultimately be launched into orbit. That combination of world-class research and practical, employer-ready skills lies at the heart of what we do. For our students, whether still studying or already well into their careers, having two members of the Royal Family witness this work first-hand is an experience they will long remember. It was a truly memorable day for our entire community."

The visit marked a return to sites with strong royal connections. Queen Elizabeth II visited the University's Guildford campus three times during her 70-year reign: in 1992, where she inaugurated the University's Centre for Satellite Engineering Research; 1998, when she once again paid a visit to the Surrey Space Centre; and in 2015, when she opened Surrey's School of Veterinary Medicine.

Patrick Degg, Vice-President, Global at the University of Surrey, said:

"We thank both The Duchess of Edinburgh and The Duke of Kent for their continued support for Surrey. The Duke has served as our Chancellor since June 1976. To have him return in this 50th year of his Chancellorship alongside The Duchess, and for them both to see the breadth of the research and teaching Surrey delivers has been a moment of collective pride.

"A programme that took in our pioneering space engineering, our new medical school and other aspects of our multidisciplinary research and teaching, spoke to the transformation The Duke has witnessed and championed throughout his tenure. His presence continues to inspire our community and affirm the values at the heart of this institution."

About Surrey Space Centre

Since its founding in 1979, the Surrey Space Centre has been a leading space engineering hub and is widely seen as the birthplace of the small satellite revolution. Professor Sir Martin Sweeting spun out Surrey Satellite Technologies Limited from his work at the Centre, and its recent missions have included RemoveDEBRIS, which demonstrated ways to capture debris in orbit.

The University recently announced the creation of the Surrey Space Institute, which brings together expertise across engineering, law, biosciences and artificial intelligence to build skills, partnerships and future space missions – with a particular focus on protecting Earth's resources and critical orbital infrastructure.

Surrey University

HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh looking at a picture of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at the University of Surrey. Credit Surrey University

Council agrees to continue jobseeker support in Epsom & Ewell

29 January 2026



On 27 January 2026, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Strategy & Resources Committee approved continued funding and delivery arrangements for the Epsom & Ewell Hub (EE Hub). This decision ensures that this valuable community service can continue helping residents develop their skills, build confidence and improve emotional wellbeing in an easily accessible location— supporting more residents to move successfully into employment. Between 2022-2025, over 1,319 residents registered with EE Hub.

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The EE Hub will continue to be delivered by Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership – a local charity that is active in employment support, skills training and community learning.



Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village), Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, said: "We are extremely proud to continue supporting the Epsom & Ewell Hub, which has become an invaluable resource for residents taking positive steps towards work.

"The Hub's strength lies in its holistic, people-centred approach—helping individuals overcome both practical barriers to employment and the anxiety or low confidence that can often accompany time out of work. For many, challenges linked to education, confidence or personal circumstances can hinder progress, and the Hub provides exactly the support needed to move forward.

"Over the past five years, the Hub has built strong partnerships with local businesses, NESCOT and DWP Jobcentre work coaches, which are essential to helping residents access training and meaningful opportunities.

"I am delighted that we are continuing our partnership with Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership to deliver this service, and I would like to thank them—and all our partners—for their commitment to providing such an effective and supportive resource for our borough."

EE Hub services available

The Epsom & Ewell Hub provides free support for residents entering the workforce or returning to work, offering help with CVs, interviews and interpersonal skills, while also supporting those facing barriers such as anxiety or low confidence. Its holistic approach includes creative activities that build resilience, and it maintains strong links with local employers—connecting jobseekers to opportunities across organisations and high street businesses—and hosting regular job fairs.

Digital support is also available, helping anyone who wants to set up a mobile phone, access email through to using Microsoft Office or finding jobs online.

Residents can also access complementary programmes and training such as Work Well, which supports adults with long-term conditions to re-engage with employment; and Multiply, a numeracy skills initiative.

Mandy Bosher, Deputy Chief Executive, Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership said: "We are delighted that, with the support of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, the Epsom & Ewell Hub has been able to help residents build new skills and gain the confidence needed to move into work. Empathy and understanding are at the heart of everything we do, and our focus is always on providing the personalised support individuals need to move forward. What inspires us most are the individual learning journeys—each one unique, powerful and truly heartwarming."

How to access EE Hub services

No appointment is needed, residents can simply drop in.

- Opening hours:9am to 5pm
- Location: 2nd Floor, Global House (opposite Waitrose exit in the Ashley Centre)
- Phone: 07903 697546
- Email:epsomandewellhub@surreyllp.org.uk
- Website:www.epsomandewellhub.com – *site is currently being updated*

Residents can also be referred through the local Job Centre Plus or other local charities and voluntary sector organisation.

More information on the EE Hub services can be found here: Employments, skills and training support | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

About the Epsom & Ewell Hub (EE Hub)

Initially the service was funded by the DWP and focused on supporting people aged 18-24 into employment. Following marked improvements in local youth unemployment, DWP funding ceased in 2023. From August 2023 the council utilised funding from the UK Prosperity Fund to support a service providing a wider range of employment support to residents of all ages across the borough and the Hub became the Epsom & Ewell Hub.

The service employs a small team of three dedicated staff, alongside other partners who deliver complementary services such as Work Well (helping to get long term sick back into employment) and other training schemes such as Multiply, a mathematical skills programme. www.epsomandewellhub.com is currently being updated

About Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership
Established in 1999, Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership (SLLP) is a registered charity. Each year they help around 2,000 people return to learn to gain new skills, qualifications and employment. They rely on a mix of income streams, including generating funds through their Bike Project social enterprise and securing grant funding for projects. About Us – Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership

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About NESCOT

The North East Surrey College Of Technology (NESCOT) is a large further education and higher education college in Epsom and Ewell, Surrey. Attracting learners from the local community, nationally and from overseas, their range of courses include Further Education, Higher Education, professional, leisure, short, full- and part-time courses. Nescot College Surrey. College of Further and Higher Education | Nescot

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Bit of monkey business in Epsom’s Town Hall Chamber

29 January 2026



A meeting of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 22nd January saw councillors approve a new schedule of planning fees and charges for 2026/27, despite repeated concerns being raised during the meeting about the absence of planning officers, gaps in supporting information, and the committee’s ability to scrutinise what it was being asked to approve.

The committee was considering fees for discretionary planning services, including Planning Performance Agreements and tree-related services, rather than nationally set statutory planning application fees.

Early in the discussion, councillors were told that questions on planning matters would need to be answered after the meeting. Chair **Peter O’Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) explained this was because no planning officers were present.

One of the first issues raised concerned retrospective planning applications. Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) recalled that councillors had previously discussed introducing higher charges to discourage developers from building first and seeking permission later.

“We get a lot of developers playing the game… trying to do developments without planning and then getting caught and putting in retrospective applications,” he said, adding that he was disappointed not to see such a charge included.

The officer response was that the matter would need to be taken away and clarified with planning colleagues.

During the same exchange, Cllr **Humphrey Reynold**s (RA West Ewell) interjected that “the worst culprit is Hobbledown… application after application retrospectively,” referring to the local visitor attraction.

Concerns then turned to the scale and transparency of proposed discretionary fees. Cllr **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College) questioned why discretionary fees were rising by 4.8 per cent, above the headline inflation rate, and whether councillors had sufficient information to justify approving them.

A officer explained that the increase followed the council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy, which sets fees at CPI plus one per cent, using September inflation figures.

A more sustained exchange followed over officer hourly rates, particularly for tree-related services. Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) calculated that the proposed hourly rate for a tree officer – £133 per hour – implied an equivalent daily rate of over £1,000. “That’s an extraordinary amount of money to charge,” he said, adding that residents as well as developers were affected by these fees.

An Officer responded that the hourly rates were not based on salary alone and reflected overheads, travel time and the need to maintain regulatory services alongside discretionary work. “These are the prices that we charge for the services we provide,” she said, adding that councils were effectively competing with the private sector for this type of work.”

However, when pressed on the specific breakdown of what residents receive for certain charges – including a £550 fee to plant a tree – officers acknowledged they could not provide detailed explanations during the meeting and would need to

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come back with written responses.

At one point, Chair Peter O'Donovan cut short the line of questioning, telling councillors: "That's our charge. People can take it or not use it."

Cllr Coley responded that this was not always the case, noting that some services, such as tree-related consents, could only be authorised by the council.

Questions were also raised about whether councillors had been given comparative data showing how Epsom and Ewell's charges stack up against neighbouring boroughs. Officers said some benchmarking had been carried out but accepted that "it's difficult to compare like for like" because councils offer services in different ways.

Later in the meeting, Cllr Freeman drew attention to newly introduced charges for primate licences, jokingly asking whether the borough was "expecting an invasion from Planet of the Apes". Officers were unable to explain the origin of the charge at the meeting and undertook to respond later.

Despite the unresolved questions, the committee voted to approve the fees and charges as presented.

After the meeting Cllr Freeman told the Epsom & Ewell Times his view the debate left councillors and viewers "feeling that relevant evidence was not provided to committee members when making their decision", particularly given that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is due to be abolished in 2027 as part of local government reorganisation.

"The implication that issues could be looked at 'next time' rather misses the point," he wrote. "There may not be a next time."

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Sam Jones – Reporter

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PS If you wish to keep a monkey or other primate the fee is £450

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Independent view of Ewell's Bourne Hall

29 January 2026



BBC LDRS reports: Up to £359,000 could be spent on rejuvenating Ewell's Bourne Hall Museum under new plans but opposition councillors have stressed that key information on the decision has been made available too late.

An independent report into the museum has now been published, laying out both the problems and the potential at the popular local attraction. The document says the museum could have a strong future, but only if the council invests money, improves how it is run and does a much better job of attracting visitors and funding.

Councillors voted earlier in January to back plans to improve the museum instead of closing it or leaving it as it is. However, no money has actually been approved yet: the decision on whether to release up to £359,000 is expected in March.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) says councillors should have seen the full report before they agreed to support the

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plans in principle. “Problems with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s secrecy and reluctant transparency are well documented,” he said. “Even the council’s auditors call it out in reports. Refusing to share an LGA report with committee members when they make a decision is another demonstration of the instinct to cover up bad news.”

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court), Leader of the Labour Group, agreed, adding: “It doesn’t make sense for councillors to be asked to make decisions without access to all the available information.”

At the January meeting, committee chair Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) admitted that, “in hindsight”, the full report should have been included in the papers after opposition councillors challenged its absence.

What the report says about the museum

The independent review made clear the museum is not in crisis but it is struggling to move forward. One of the biggest issues is money. The report said it is hard for the museum to win grants or sponsorship because it does not have solid information about its visitors.

Funders want to know who comes through the door, how often, and how numbers might grow in future. But at the moment the data is limited.

The report also says that the way the council currently counts costs makes it hard to see the true price of running the museum. It recommends sorting this out so future funding bids are more realistic and transparent.

Visitors may also recognise some of the other issues raised. Displays are described as dated, marketing as uninspiring, and the museum’s overall “identity” as unclear. Reviewers said the space could be made more interactive and appealing, especially for families and younger people.

The report praised the museum for already attracting a strong mix of ages, especially families. Its location inside Bourne Hall which also houses the library and community spaces was also seen as a major advantage. With better use of the building and stronger promotion, it could become more of a destination.

Volunteers are another key part of the picture. The report says there are some highly committed people helping out, but not enough of them. It suggests recruiting more volunteers from a wider range of backgrounds to better reflect the local community.

A council spokesperson said: “The Community and Wellbeing Committee has initiated the first step in a process to invest in the future of Bourne Hall Museum by submitting their preferred option, which was to spend up to £250,000 over two years, to the Strategy and Resources Committee for their consideration in March.

“Before committee, Community & Wellbeing Committee members saw a summary of the Culture Peer Challenge in the committee report and were invited to attend a briefing session which also summarised the findings of the report. The LGA Culture Peer Challenge for Bourne Hall Museum has been made available to all EEBC councillors and is also available on our website: Culture Peer Challenge | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.”

What happens next?

In short, the museum’s future now depends on whether councillors agree to invest. If funding is approved in March, work could begin on modernising the space and building a stronger long-term future. If not, things are likely to stay much as they are.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up

View of Bourne Hall and Museum, Spring Street, Ewell. (Credit: Google Street View)

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100 years campaigning to keep Surrey Green

29 January 2026



Dear Surrey,

The countryside is your greatest achievement. A beautiful masterpiece built by centuries of collaboration between people and nature. From meadows and woodlands to rivers, coasts, and the green spaces that bind us together, the countryside connects and sustains us all.

For a century, the Campaign to Protect Rural England has been its guardian. Despite the relentless, growing pressure on our landscapes, we've stood up for the countryside and helped give the people who love it a voice. That will never change.

Many of the pressures facing our countryside today were familiar to our founders – not least the challenge of providing homes, infrastructure and prosperity on a small island. But new pressures have emerged with more catastrophic impacts on the land we love. Nature is in freefall and climate change threatens to alter our landscapes for good.

Now more than ever, decisions about how we use our land are leading to the needless loss of landscapes and everything they support. Without drastic action, much of what makes our countryside unique and beautiful will be lost.

Wherever we live, we rely on the countryside for clean air, home grown food, thriving wildlife and resilience in the face of climate change. Yet these foundations are being chipped away. Too often decisions are shaped by profit, not what's needed most – and the countryside pays the price.

Here in Surrey, we have even been faced with a series of major housing developments, access roads, 'solar farms' and 'battery energy storage systems', in Green Belt countryside. Many of these sites are on the edge of the Surrey Hills National Landscape itself.

Now, as 2026 dawns we are now battling a growing number of planning applications which rely on councils downgrading Green Belt land to so-called 'grey belt', as well as excessive and unsustainable housebuilding targets imposed on local communities.

Our centenary vision is for a countryside that's greener, more resilient and protected for future generations. There is a better way – one we're calling for, and one everyone can be part of:

• Stop the loss of countryside. Let's protect what we love and do everything we can to make sure green fields and woodlands aren't needlessly lost.

• Improve the quality of the countryside for future generations. That means thriving communities, clean rivers, healthy food and resilient landscapes rich in nature.

• Inspire more people to care for the countryside. A countryside for all where more people take action to enjoy and protect it.

Across the country, people are already showing what's possible – restoring hedgerows, rethinking development and sustainable farming, and making space for nature.

As we begin our centenary year, we're sending this message to everyone: love your countryside and be part of its future. This is just the beginning – and we all have a part to play in shaping what comes next.If you share this vision, join the movement today, add your name to this letter and stand with us.

Yours faithfully,

Andy Smith

Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (Surrey)

Photo: Surrey Hills Credit Aleksey Maksimov CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED

A surprise glimpse into 1883: Christ Church Epsom Common's Parish Magazine

29 January 2026

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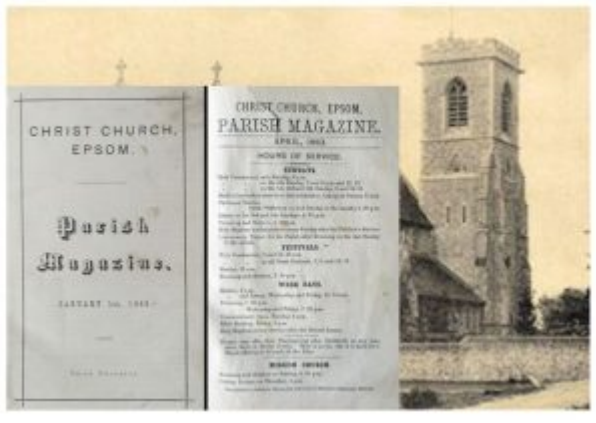

Out of the blue, Christ Church Epsom Common was recently approached by a Worcestershire-based bookseller and gratefully accepted her kind gift of a bound volume (about the size of a modern paperback) of parish magazines from 1883. The volume, too battered and niche for resale, nonetheless provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of the parish just seven years after the church's consecration in 1876.

There were Christ Church parish magazines before this: the January 1883 edition refers to an item in the now-lost December 1882 magazine. As with many such publications, they were seen as ephemeral at the time. Although issued monthly, the next surviving edition in the Christ Church archive dates from 1900, with records then remaining patchy until the late 1940s, when systematic retention began.

Both the gold-stamped spine and the frontispiece give the contents simply as *Parish Magazine 1883*, with no mention of the parish name. The editor is listed as J Erskine Clarke MA, an Anglican clergyman who, in January 1859, launched what is regarded as the world's first commercial parish magazine inset, prosaically titled *Parish Magazine*. Each monthly edition ran to around 24 pages and combined religious material with a surprisingly wide range of secular content.

Alongside sermons and Bible studies were items of fiction (often moralising), practical advice, articles on British wildlife, and descriptions of churches and places at home and abroad. The 1883 editions included pieces such as *First Aid to the Sick*, *Making a Will*, an account of a visit to Malta, an unexpectedly open-minded article on Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, and the intriguingly titled *Worms and their Habits*. Each issue carried at least two engraved illustrations, particularly to accompany the travel articles.

The inset was published by Wells Gardner, Darton & Company of Paternoster Buildings, London, specialists in ecclesiastical publishing, and printed by Strangeways & Sons. It was always intended to be surrounded by locally produced parish material. At Christ Church this usually amounted to a further eight pages, printed and bound with the inset by local firm L W Andrews & Son. In some months, when local material ran to only four pages, the usual plain cover was altered to make better use of the available space.

Parishioners paid 2d per issue – roughly £1 in today's money.

Much of the local content was routine but revealing. Each issue set out the full schedule of services for the coming month, listing not only Sunday services but weekday Mattins and Evensong, along with the hymns to be sung. Lists of baptisms, marriages and funerals followed, together with a standard notice inviting women to offer Thanksgiving after Childbirth, "there being no fee, but it being usual for a Thank-offering to be made at the Altar". Details of the previous month's collections were also carefully recorded.

Christ Church did not acquire its own church hall until 1899, so meetings and events were held in a variety of venues. The January 1883 magazine lists the Vicarage, the Working Men's Club, the Infant School and the Guild Room. The then-new Working Men's Club, opened in 1881 and later renamed the Epsom Common Club, stood just across Stamford Green.

The Infant School, now lost, stood on West Hill (then known as Clay Hill). Founded through an 1844 endowment by Miss Elizabeth Trotter of Horton Manor, O'Kelly's former racing stables were converted for the education of children from families on Epsom Common. The school closed in 1925 and was later demolished.

Another regular feature was the "Penny Bank", encouraging thrift among parishioners. Deposits could be made weekly at the Vicarage, with interest paid at 2½ per cent – or 5 per cent for children attending Christ Church Sunday School.

The January issue opened with a letter from the Vicar, the Revd Archer Hunter, then barely a year into what would become a 30-year incumbency. After setting out his vision for the developing parish, he appealed for more Sunday School teachers and closed by wishing all a Happy New Year – though only, he cautioned, for those "determined to spend it in the constant Presence of their God and Saviour".

Later editions offer vivid glimpses of parish life. February records a recitation of *Dickens' Christmas Carol* in the Infant School room, delivered by Mr Mechelen Rogers before a large audience. While not all were amused, those "qualified to give an opinion" spoke in the highest terms of his performance, promising him an "enthusiastic and noiseless" reception should he return.

March saw the founding of a parish branch of the Church of England Temperance Society, with 37 parishioners unanimously adopting a strongly worded resolution identifying intemperance as a source of poverty, crime and irreligion. Members signed pledges ranging from total abstinence to more qualified commitments, and the movement quickly attracted both adult and juvenile members.

The same edition listed the parish's current "Wants", including Sunday School teachers, a parish bier, a bookcase and books for a parochial library, and a new organ stop. It is a pleasing historical coincidence that this very volume survives bearing a library label inside its front cover, suggesting it was once item number 436 in that collection and heavily used.

For parishes that bound their magazines into annual volumes, the national publishers supplied a frontispiece and index, with the binding undertaken locally. A small label inside the rear cover of this book shows it was bound by John Snashall of Epsom High Street. Though now in poor condition, the quality of the leather spine and gold-blocked title speak of

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careful craftsmanship.

More than a century on, this battered volume offers a remarkably intimate picture of parish life in Victorian Epsom Common – practical, moral, communal and often surprisingly vivid.

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Image: Christ Church from postcard 1900 and the front pages of the January and April 1883 editions by Roger Morgan © 2022

Surrey council budget published

29 January 2026



Surrey residents can expect to pay 4.99 per cent more council tax next year under plans in the new budget. Surrey County Council has revealed it is losing a huge chunk of government funding and has 'no choice' but to fill the gap locally.

Councillors are being asked to approve a 2.99 per cent council tax rise plus a 2 per cent adult social care levy from April 2026, the maximum allowed. For a typical Band D household, that means paying £7.67 more per month.

The increase comes after the Government announced a new three-year funding deal covering 2026-2029. While ministers say councils will get more money overall, most of the so-called "increase" relies on councils raising tax locally, not extra cash from Westminster.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said: "This is one of the most challenging financial periods we've faced.

"The removal of funding from the government means that within three years, 92 per cent of the local government budget in Surrey will have to come from Council Tax. Even putting Council Tax up by the maximum amount each year – as expected by government – will see no real increase in spending power for Surrey Councils. As costs rise with inflation and demand for services increases, there will be a local government funding black hole in Surrey without driving out further efficiencies.

"Our focus is to protect the services residents rely on: adult social care, children's services, support for communities, and the roads that keep Surrey moving, while continuing the strong financial discipline Surrey has shown in recent years and building a stable financial foundation for the new councils in April 2027."

For Surrey, the picture is stark. The council argues that even after maxing out council tax, the council's core spending power will rise by just 0.6 per cent next year and 1 per cent by 2028/29, effectively a cut once inflation is factored in.

The council's finance boss warned Surrey will lose more than £180m in government funding over the next three years. "There is nothing fair about this funding review for Surrey residents," they said. "Even with maximum council tax rises, we're still facing a funding gap of over £100m by 2028/29."

"The broken funding system we inherited has left local authorities across the country in crisis," the ministerial forward from the Funding Review 2.0 reads. "To turn this around, we need to reset local government so that it is fit, legal and decent and can, once again, reliably deliver for our communities. We are going to work with local authorities to rebuild throughout this parliament."

Why is funding being cut?

The changes stem from Fair Funding Reform, which reshuffles how government money is shared out. Areas with higher deprivation get more support, while wealthier areas lose out.

Since Surrey can raise more through council tax, the Government assumes it needs less help. This is despite soaring demand for services, especially children's services and adult social care.

What's in the budget?

The council's final-ever budget before it is abolished in 2027 totals £1.27bn – up just 1 per cent on last year. Officers warn finances are now more stretched than ever and tough decisions will continue.

To balance the books, the council plans:

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- £50m in service cuts and efficiencies
- £42m in corporate savings
- Continued investment in:
- SEND support (nearly £15m extra)
- Adult social care (over 5 per cent increase)
- Road repairs
- New school places
- Children’s homes

What happens next?

The Cabinet will decide what to recommend to the full council, including tax levels and spending plans. Despite the pressure, leaders insist the council remains financially stable, with £114m in reserves. But they admit the next few years will be tough and the new councils taking over in 2027 will inherit some hard choices.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Surrey County Council headquarters. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

Surrey consults on next year’s budget

Surrey to sell off property in Epsom and elsewhere to fill budget gaps

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A Surrey Council’s finances don’t add-up for 6th year running

29 January 2026



Spelthorne Borough Council’s finances are still so muddled that they will not be fully fixed before it disappears into a new mega-council in West Surrey, says a new report. External auditors have once again refused to sign off the accounts, warning “time is not necessarily on the [council’s] side”.

Audit firm Grant Thornton told Spelthorne councillors at an Audit Committee meeting on January 22, that they cannot get enough evidence to say the numbers of the council’s 2024/25 accounts are right. The auditors said they will issue another “disclaimer of opinion” on the council’s 2024/25 accounts.

It is now the sixth year in a row Spelthorne has failed to get a clean audit. Meaning, the council cannot show all its balance sheets add up. This means the local authority does not know how much usable reserves it has or the true value of its assets.

The core problem is historic. For years the council’s accounts were not properly audited, leaving big question marks over old balances, reserves and property values. As auditors cannot trust the starting figures, they cannot fully trust the current ones either.

Auditors said the lack of assurance will carry forward into next year and even into the new West Surrey unitary council when local government reorganisation happens.

Cllr Chris Bateson said: “And there’s nothing we can do about that.?” To which, one auditor responded: “Time is not necessarily on your side.” But she added, most of the councils in Surrey face the same challenging position of being sure of their accounts.

What does this mean for residents?

This is not a bankruptcy notice, the council has not run out of money. Residents’ bins will still be collected and parks will be maintained. But this signals a long-running uncertainty about how solid the council’s position really is.

For instance, this means big financial decisions are being made with an incomplete map and so increases the risk of

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mistakes. However, if finances are unclear, the council is monitored more closely by the financial watchdog and less likely to make major investment decisions

As Spelthorne is heading into a new unitary authority in 2027, these historic accounting issues will be transferred to the new council. The new West Surrey Council will have to deal with not just Spelthorne's accounts, but potentially five other ones.

Some progress but still serious problems

It was not all bad news. Auditors said Spelthorne's finance team has improved over the past year. Records are better organised, responses to questions are quicker, and the draft accounts were in better shape than before. So Grant Thornton could check more figures than last year.

One long-running mystery is a £17.6m gap between two key financial measures. The difference has been sitting in the accounts for years and still has not been fully explained, according to the report.

Auditors also found the council has been using the wrong method to set aside money to repay borrowing, something that affects long-term financial stability. A £9.9m property value increase was also put in the wrong set of accounts and now has to be reversed.

On top of that, there were dozens of technical mistakes and missing disclosures that auditors said should have been spotted internally before the accounts were sent over.

Bigger worries about value for money

In a separate verdict, auditors said they are not satisfied the council currently has strong enough arrangements to ensure it is spending money efficiently and sustainably.

Council officers said they have strengthened the finance team and are building more time into the process of preparing next year's accounts. But with reorganisation looming, the clean-up job now looks set to become the new council's problem too.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Spelthorne Borough Council offices in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

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Redhill developers make a towering mistake

29 January 2026



Two major landmark towers that would have dominated a Surrey town have been dismissed with campaigners claiming a major victory in their long-running battle. Developers Solum Regeneration had been hoping to build high-rises of 14 and 15 stories next to Redhill station, but were refused planning permission by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council in 2024. Undeterred, they dug in and challenged the decision through the courts forcing a long drawn-out process. Residents, however, galvanised to challenge the process.

Now, they are celebrating after the planning inspectorate threw out the bid to create Redhill's tallest buildings saying it would forever harm the town's character, blot out existing views of wooded hills outside Redhill, and create pedestrian safety risks. Redhill Residents Action Group (RRAG), formed to represent hundreds of residents and rail users.

The appeal, brought by Solum Development, a partnership between Network Rail and Keir, was opposed on planning grounds relating to design quality, impact on heritage and town character and the effect on access to a vital transport hub.

Jan Sharman, Campaign lead for RRAG said: "We have always believed this was the wrong development for such an important site. Redhill station should be embracing the future, with integrated rail, bus and active travel.
"Developers need to think with vision and create places that genuinely work for communities."

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Solum had insisted the development was needed for the town and would deliver 255 much needed housing to the area – particularly as the council is missing its targets. The scheme would have also revamped the railway station, and increased footfall to town centre.

The taxi rank would have been relocated to the back of the station, with most drivers and cyclists directed to the steep Redstone Hill entrance. Disability campaigners said this would shut those mobility issues out. The inspector however decided the sheer size of the scheme was just too much.

Jan added: “We fully recognise the need for more homes, particularly for younger people. But homes must be genuinely affordable, well designed and properly integrated into their surroundings. Building housing that people cannot afford, in the wrong place, helps no one.”

The inquiry was held over September 2 to 5 and continued between November 24 to 28 last year. Planning inspector Joanna Gilbert issued her decision on January 19, 2026. She said: “The proposal would provide the benefit of 255 housing units that carries substantial weight. There would be other benefits to which I have afforded significant, moderate and limited weight. However, I have afforded very substantial weight to the adverse effects on the character and appearance of the area.”

“There are moderate, limited and very limited levels of less than substantial harms to designated heritage assets and a moderate indirect adverse effect on a non-designated heritage asset. There would also be significant weight to the harm in respect of highway and pedestrian safety, including parking. Additionally, there would be moderate weight to the harm to living conditions for some occupiers of Quadrant House.”

She added: “For the reasons set out above, the appeal is dismissed.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Redhill Train Station development 15-storey tower block distance CGI (Credit Solum planning documents)

Heathrow 3rd runway green-light by 2029?

29 January 2026



Heathrow Airport has begun working on its third runway planning application with the aim of getting the green light by 2029.

Last November, the Government indicated that the West London hub’s plan, which involves re-routing and tunnelling the M25, would be the preferred basis for expansion.

A second, less disruptive, option that featured a smaller runway put forward by Arora was rejected.

Now, Heathrow has announced it will begin getting its blueprints in order – in what it has called a significant step forward for the UK’s most important growth project.

The Government will still need to push through regulatory and policy decisions this year that will determine whether the £33billion 3,500m long runway project can proceed.

If built, it would increase the number of flights at Heathrow to 756,000 a year, with 150million people expected to use the airport. In 2024, the airport handled 83.9 million passengers while operating at 99 per cent of its annual flight capacity of 480,000.

Heathrow CEO Thomas Woldbye said: “Expansion is taking another significant step forward today as our board greenlights starting work on the planning application.

“This decision means we are on track to secure planning permission by 2029 and reflects Ministers’ renewed commitment to expansion and progress made to speed up delivery of the project to boost UK economic growth.

“Heathrow expansion is a critical national project and a central part of our journey to make Heathrow an extraordinary airport, fit for the future. Maintaining momentum will mean the CAA and Ministers remain focussed on securing the benefits of the project by meeting vital milestones in 2026 that are essential to enabling the next phase of delivery.”

Heathrow argues expansion would drive long-term economic growth and see billions invested into the UK while strengthening airline networks and enhancing the UK’s global trading links.

Critics slam the plans for the devastating impact it would have on the environment and challenge the financial benefits saying they are both overstated – and with many of extra passengers being transit, the benefits would be felt elsewhere.

Others believe the airport is already too close to London and Surrey and the added noise would blight millions of lives.

The Government believes the project can be delivered while meeting national environmental targets.

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The timetable for the complex project has the runway coming into operation by 2039.

Key dates to look out for before then include Spring 2026 when the Civil Aviation Authority is expected to provide clarity on early stage project costs.

In the summer the Department for Transport is scheduled to publish its draft Airports National Policy Statement.

In the autumn, Parliament will decide on the project's planning framework.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

3rd Runway Plans (image Heathrow)

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Heathrow expansion reaction

Surrey Police's AI powered face recognition cameras in the spotlight

29 January 2026



Surrey Police will continue to use AI-powered surveillance vans to scan thousands of people's faces in public locations despite fears over ethnic bias, said councillors calling for their use to be put on hold.

The Home Office is funding the use of new artificial intelligence powered cameras in Surrey to scan the faces of anybody who crosses their path.

On November 26 last year, the police brought the technology to Woking and recorded 7,686 people over a five-hour recording period – to cross reference them against known suspects.

The force has said the system was safe following a 2023 study that found previous bias in the system had been coded out – but more recent testing by the National Physical Laboratory suggests false positives are still happening too frequently among ethnic minorities.

The report read: "At the operational setting used by police, the testing identified that in a limited set of circumstances the algorithm is more likely to incorrectly include some demographic groups in its search results."

The Home Office has said will act on the findings and that a "new algorithm has been procured and independently tested, which can be used at settings with no significant demographic variation in performance.

The new algorithm is due to be operationally tested early next year and will be subject to evaluation."

It has led to calls from Woking Borough Councillors for the system to be mothballed until it has been thoroughly tested – something which Surrey Police has so far refused to do.

Speaking at a Tuesday, December 20, meeting of the borough's communities and housing scrutiny committee, Surrey Police Chief Inspector Andy Hill described the system as having the support of the Home Office and said it was a valuable tool "to keep Surrey safe."

He said: "It's a safe place but if we've got the opportunity to use the latest technology then we want to make sure that we are doing that." Early versions of the software created false alerts at a disproportionate rate among ethnic groups.

In London the Met Police is facing a High Court challenge after an anti-knife crime activist said he was misidentified and threatened with arrest. Surrey Police said it was confident in the system and that people are only arrested under suspicion, it does not mean guilt.

The technology is used in high footfall areas and is said to have a chilling effect on crime with notable falls in the following weeks after its deployment.

Any images that do not match those on its wanted list are instantly deleted. Matched faces are deleted at the end of the day. If the system thinks it has found a face on the police's wanted database officers at the scene are notified and it is up to them how to proceed.

Committee chair Cllr Tom Bonsundy-O'Bryan said: "I have very serious concerns about the proportionality of this. Are the

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pros, which feels pretty limited in one of the safest town centres in the UK, worth the cost of 7,000 free citizens having their faces scanned by this technology?

“This doesn’t feel like targeted policing, it doesn’t feel like proportionate policing. It starts to feel like something more Orwellian in a kind of mass surveillance. With everything that you’ve said, all the facts about data not being stored, data not being used to train models

“It still feels like an overreach into people’s privacy, people’s rights fundamentally. Is there a point when it’s not proportionate, how many faces should we scan? To me it already feels vastly disproportionate.”

Chief Insp Hill said: “We are in the view that it is proportionate and it is appropriate and it is technology available to us. We don’t feel like we are reaching into a technology space. The van is funded by the Home Office, it’s why we want to continue using it but also keep it under review.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

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EEBC reports air quality milestone and revised carbon emissions figures

29 January 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Environment Committee has noted a series of climate and air quality updates, including the formal revocation of the Ewell High Street Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) and revised figures showing a reduction in the council’s own operational carbon emissions since 2019/20.

The update was presented to councillors on 20 January as part of the council’s second Climate Change Action Plan, which runs from 2025 to 2029 and sets out measures intended to support the council’s stated aim of reaching carbon neutrality by 2035.

According to the report, the AQMA covering Ewell High Street has now been revoked following sustained improvements in nitrogen dioxide levels. The zone was originally designated in 2007 after pollution levels linked largely to road traffic exceeded national limits. The council acknowledged that while local measures played a role, wider national and regional factors, including vehicle fleet modernisation, also contributed to the improvement.

Alongside the air quality decision, the council reported a revision to its historical carbon emissions baseline after receiving more accurate electricity consumption data for Epsom Town Hall, Bourne Hall and Epsom Playhouse. Full-year data for 2019/20 and 2020/21 had previously been unavailable and earlier figures were based on estimates.

The revised baseline places council operational emissions in 2019/20 at 1,487 tonnes of CO_2 equivalent. For 2024/25, emissions are reported as 1,201 tonnes, representing a reduction of around 19 per cent over the period. Most subsequent years were unchanged by the revision, with the adjustments largely confined to the two earliest years.

The report also listed a number of property and energy efficiency measures undertaken in recent years, including replacement of windows at Bourne Hall, LED lighting upgrades at Epsom Playhouse, and the installation of a 177kWp solar photovoltaic system at the council’s leisure centre. The council estimates that the leisure centre installation alone could save more than 30 tonnes of carbon emissions annually, based on partial-year data.

In addition, councillors were reminded of partnership schemes intended to support residents in reducing household emissions, including advice programmes and grant schemes for heating and energy upgrades.

Chair of the Environment Committee Councillor **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley) said the Climate Change Action Plan was intended to guide long-term changes in how the council operates and delivers services, and highlighted the AQMA revocation as an example of sustained action producing measurable results.

The updated emissions data and air quality decisions form part of the council’s annual monitoring of climate-related activity, which is reported back to councillors each year.

Sam Jones – Reporter

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Ex-Gendarme launches Epsom safety awareness programme for children

29 January 2026



A new safety awareness programme for children has been launched in **Epsom** by former French armed police officer Xavier Vollin, who now works in the UK as a close protection officer for foreign diplomats and a behavioural detection instructor. Mr Vollin, who was awarded a Medal for Bravery during his police service, has more than 25 years’ frontline experience in law enforcement, personal protection and behavioural analysis. He also trains colleagues in recognising early warning signs and behavioural anomalies in everyday environments. The initiative, developed under his training company XavSafety, is currently being piloted with children aged 9 to 13, with plans to expand to older teenagers and adults.

Seeing what others miss

Mr Vollin said that much traditional safety advice focuses on what to do once a situation has already gone wrong, whereas his approach concentrates on what happens before that point, helping participants notice changes in behaviour, inconsistencies in surroundings and subtle cues that may signal emerging risk. The programme emphasises calm awareness, observation and environmental understanding rather than confrontation or fear-based thinking. It is described as helping children “see what others miss”, while remaining age-appropriate, engaging and accessible. Mr Vollin said the aim is not to turn children into “mini security officers”, but to help them become more present, confident and aware of how people and environments can change around them.

Pilot programme underway in Epsom

The initial six-week programme began in early January 2026 and has deliberately been kept small to allow the format to be refined and adapted before wider rollout. Sessions combine practical exercises with elements of behavioural observation and pattern recognition, presented in a way intended to remain playful rather than intimidating. Early feedback from parents and children has been positive, although images and evaluation material are currently limited while the pilot phase continues. Future developments are expected to include programmes for older teenagers and adults, exploring the same core skills in greater depth, and Mr Vollin intends to formalise the framework and pursue CPD accreditation.

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Focus on awareness in a digital age

Mr Vollin said the wider purpose of the project is to help young people reconnect with their surroundings at a time when attention is increasingly absorbed by screens. He described the underlying idea as being less about strength or reaction, and more about presence, understanding people and recognising risk early, before reaction becomes the only option. The programme is currently launching locally in Epsom, with potential for expansion depending on demand and community interest. Further details about the initiative can be found on the XavSafety website.

Sam Jones – Reporter



The process of appointing the new local government chiefs begins

29 January 2026



Councillors from across Surrey met this week for the very first time as part of two new committees set up to manage the county's biggest council shake-up in decades.

The East Surrey Voluntary Joint Committee met yesterday (Thursday, January 15) at Woodhatch Place in Reigate, while the West Surrey Voluntary Joint Committee met today (Friday, January 16) at Woking Borough Council.

It marks a major milestone in plans to scrap Surrey's current council system and replace it with two brand-new authorities: West Surrey Council and East Surrey Council.

What is changing?

Last year, the Government announced that Surrey County Council and the county's 11 district and borough councils will be merged into just two big councils.

In May, residents will vote for councillors who will sit on these new authorities. At first, they'll act as 'shadow councils' which means they will be basically planning everything behind the scenes. From April 2027, the new councils will officially take over all local services. Until then, the current councils will keep running things as normal.

Why these meetings matter

Since there is a lot of work to do and not much time to merge all the responsibilities of the local authorities and split them in half, councillors have volunteered to get started early.

The two new joint committees are made up of existing councillors from county, district and borough councils. Their job is to start laying the groundwork for the big transition.

At their first meetings, both committees agreed to:

- Create a single implementation plan to manage the change safely and legally
- Set up an implementation team made up of senior council officers
- Decide how key interim leadership roles will be filled

This includes recommending temporary appointments for three crucial posts:

- Head of Paid Service (the council's top boss)
- Chief Finance Officer (in charge of the council's financial health)
- Monitoring Officer (who keeps everything legal)

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These roles are required by law and will support the new shadow councils until permanent staff are recruited.

‘An important milestone’

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council and senior officer in charge of the reorganisation, said: “This is an important milestone and I’m grateful that councillors have agreed to come together on a voluntary basis to get this vital work underway.

“At the heart of this is making sure residents continue to get the services they expect – both now and under the new councils.”

He added that councils are “well prepared for change” and committed to making the transition as smooth as possible for residents and staff.

What happens next?

Both committees will now meet monthly, rotating locations around their areas. They will keep meeting this way until the shadow councils are formally created after the May elections.

Each committee will have 10 members: five from Surrey County Council and five from district and borough councils. Their work programmes will be published online so residents can see what is being discussed.

Bigger plans for Surrey

The Government has also said simplifying councils will help pave the way for more devolution, meaning more powers could be handed down to Surrey in future.

Talks are already under way about setting up a new strategic authority, like a metro mayor, for the county. For now, councillors say the focus is on getting the basics right which means making sure the new councils are ready to hit the ground running in 2027.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Councillors for the East Surrey Voluntary Joint Committee. (Credit: Surrey County Council). Epsom and Ewell Borough Coucil leader Cllr Hannah Dalton (RA Stoneleigh far left)

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