

Too hot to ignore: Why Surrey must act now

A series of intense heatwaves have been a feature of the summer of 2026. Extreme heat, once rare, now occurs regularly, in Surrey as in many parts of Europe. The heatwaves have caused over 2,700 excess deaths in England and Wales in May and June alone. The severe strain on health services was demonstrated by the critical incident declared by East Surrey Hospital in June, attributed to high levels of demand on its emergency care services, exacerbated by high temperaturesⁱ. Surrey has also suffered many wildfires, with Surrey Fire and Rescue Service having attended 679 outdoor fires in 2026 at the time of writing, and 192 incidents having occurred in July aloneⁱⁱ. Hundreds of schools have had to close or shut early due to extreme heat this summerⁱⁱⁱ. Meanwhile Surrey is one of the areas covered by the Environment Agency's drought declaration^{iv}, and a hose pipe ban covers the majority of the county. Moreover, Surrey's farmers are warning of reduced food production, with associated food price rises.

Initial estimates indicate that the heat waves have cost the UK about £3-4 billion in lost output. Put simply, we cannot cope and do not have the infrastructure needed to handle this new normal. The heat and drought have also severely stressed ecosystems and endangered wildlife, trees and other vegetation across our green land.

Evidence of climate change is here, and it will get worse. Scientists and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are clear that the human release of carbon into the atmosphere from the use of fossil fuels is causing the planet to heat up. Their work also tells us that the global heating trajectory will continue, meaning that, whilst there might be fluctuations some years, the overall trend is that heat waves will be more frequent, last longer and with higher temperatures. Increased sea and atmospheric temperatures will also mean that there will be more moisture in the atmosphere which will lead, at other times of the year, to higher rainfall and flooding.

This year, there will be further disruption due to the expected strong El Niño, which is a naturally occurring climate oscillation in the tropical Pacific. El Niño is expected to bring wetter, stormier autumn and winter weather to England, with increased flood risks. Global crop disruptions may raise prices of imported foods like rice, cocoa, coffee and oils, which could increase the cost of living through higher food inflation.

Climate change is a global crisis, which can have the effect of leaving us feeling powerless and despairing. In the face of such a huge and seemingly unstoppable issue, we might wonder whether there is anything we can do that makes a difference. But there are positive changes taking place and much more that we can do. Increasingly, technological advances are reducing the cost of shifting away from old technologies requiring fossil fuels, for example renewable energy sources. More people will be affected by, and will be seeing for themselves evidence of climate change and will want the leaders of Surrey to respond.

We have four asks of our leaders in Surrey:

- Surrey shows leadership by doing all it can to reduce carbon emissions. We urge the new East and West Surrey Unitary Authorities adopt the approach set out in Surrey County Council's *Strategic Recommendations for Climate Action*^v.
- Surrey leaders put in place measures that protect citizens from the worst effects of global heating, for example by improving home insulation and introducing flood prevention measures.
- Surrey leaders implement an integrated local transport plan that enables low carbon, healthy travel as in the existing Local Transport Plan (LTP4)^{vi}
- Surrey leaders use their influence to stop decisions that will exacerbate the release of fossil fuels: in particular, they should argue against drilling for oil at Horse Hill in Surrey. They should also support wider measures to urgently reduce the use of fossil fuels and invest in the infrastructure needed to deal with the changing climate.
- Surrey council leaders give citizens an opportunity to participate in informed debate about the changes needed to make Surrey a place where both people and nature can thrive. Following the example of Elmbridge's Citizens' Climate Change Panel^{vii} would be a good start.

The Surrey Climate Commission and many community groups across Surrey are ready and willing to work with the new Surrey authorities to help deliver the changes that are becoming increasingly urgent.

Chris Hyde, August 2026

References

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg4j323eq9o>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/community/news/categories/your-council/small-actions-big-consequences>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.surreycomet.co.uk/news/national/26220641.hundreds-schools-close-shut-early-amid-extreme-heat/>

^{iv} <https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/surrey-news/drought-declared-surrey-no-significant-34371451>

^v <https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/documents/s107895/Annex%20A%20-%20Surrey%20Climate%20Strategic%20Recommendations.pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/policies-plans-consultations/transport-plan>

^{vii} <https://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/sustainable-elmbridge-0/climate-change-citizens-panel>