MERROW RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

MINUTES of the ANNUAL AUTUMN MEETING

Held at St John's Centre on Monday 2nd of November 2026

Chair - Keith Meldrum (KM)

This meeting has a different character than other Autumn meetings. KM welcomes everybody, especially Cllrs George Potter (GP) and Jo Shaw (JS).

Attendance estimated at 90 people.

Agenda

1. Local authority re-organisation – West Surrey Unitary Authority
2. New Town / Parish Council for Guildford including Merrow
3. New Local Plan
4. Green Belt review

Plan for the evening was:

- To take each agenda item one by one
- Then ask for comments from George Potter, Jo Shaw and Kathy Atkinson (KA) on the Green Belt review
- Open the floor for questions on the item
- Then move on to next item

1. LOCAL AUTHORITY RE-ORGANISATION - WEST SURREY UNITARY AUTHORITY

- Start date 1st April 2027
- All 12 Local Authorities in Surrey disappear on that date
- Therefore, Guildford Borough Council disappears
- Two very large authorities to be formed for all Surrey
- Merrow is in West Surrey Unitary Authority
- Election was on 7th May 2026 for Shadow Authority Councillors
- 2 Councillors for Merrow (shared with Burpham) – a reduction from 4
- George Potter and Jo Shaw elected
- Council has 90 members, and for some subjects there will be an area committee
- Major debt problem of over £3 billion from Woking and Spelthorne Councils

Surrey will be divided into West Surrey and East Surrey. West Surrey council civic meetings will be in Guildford; the staffing will be in Woking. Legally the new council is not allowed to be in debt from day one, but government has not revealed yet how this problem will be solved although £500m has been allocated by Whitehall to offset some of Woking's debt. The council tax in the various councils is not the same in the various Council areas and will be gradually harmonised.

Question: Why should Guildford have to pay for Woking's debt?

Answer: This is one of the one of the big issues raised when the idea of local government reform was first suggested in Surrey, and the idea that we should volunteer to go on the fast-track programme and cancel the county elections to do it. The new West Surrey Council could sell assets. Guildford has quite a large investment portfolio; however, the Local Parish

has first refusal for purchase of these assets. GBC has been going through a process over the past few years of reviewing all its assets and analysing what is bringing in money, what is losing money, examining the terms of their financial assets, therefore Guildford is already in a better place to decide what is disposable. GP will try to provide a list of these assets.

West Surrey Authority Services

- Waste collection and recycling
- Planning and building control
- Adult social care and children's services
- Highways and transport
- Housing and homelessness support
- Environmental health
- Leisure and community services

Therefore, all services

2. NEW TOWN / PARISH COUNCIL FOR GUILDFORD, INCLUDING MERROW

- Plans to strengthen local representation in communities across West Surrey are moving forward
- Following Community Governance Reviews carried out by borough councils, proposals include creating new Parish Councils for Guildford and Englefield Green
- The West Surrey Shadow Executive has agreed to take forward these locally developed proposals and complete the legal steps needed to establish the new Parish arrangements from 1 April 2027.
- Temporary arrangements may also be put in place to support Parish Councils until elections are held in May 2027.



Advantages / Disadvantages

- More influence on key local authority decisions
- More decisions close to the coal face
- Would allow Merrow residents to have the same decision-making powers as existing parishes
- Could have a Ceremonial Mayor for Guildford
- But there will be additional cost of c.£69 per Band D property

Question: How would the division of responsibilities be split between the area committee for Guildford and Parish Council for Guildford?

Answer there is no division yet, because it's not yet been established. Across West Surrey, there is a huge variation. It depends whether there are Parish and Town Councils or not. It *is* quite clear that a new Parish Council would start off with three crucial powers, automatically managing the allotments in their area, that is guaranteed in law; they have the power to write and adopt neighbourhood plans, subject to local referenda; and they have the right to comment and have their comments recorded on all planning applications in their area. Beyond that, they have the power to basically do anything, buy anything, and provide any service that they see fit for the benefit of their community. West Surrey, by contrast, has a list of services it is legally obliged to provide. The area committees will be looking at doing those things which are not dealt with at West Surrey level but can be dealt with locally. If a Parish Council were taking over the town museum, then the area committee would no longer deal with it. It is also likely that the area committees will have to meet locally in public. We would expect that there will probably be quite a close relationship between the Parish Council and the area committee.

Question: Could you explain the difference between the mayor for Guildford as against the elected mayor for the whole of Surrey?

Answer: Currently there is a ceremonial mayor of Guildford, which is a purely civic ceremonial position. The Parish Council has the right in law, to inherit Guildford's royal charter, making us a borough with the right to appoint our own ceremonial mayor. A regional mayor of West Surrey is a political elected position.

Question: How many Parish councillors will there be for Guildford?

Answer: There'll be a total of 24 Parish Councillors for Guildford, three being from Merrow, two from Burpham.

Question: Is the cost of £69 controlled by the council tax?

Answer: No, Parish councils can either lower or increase the precept as much as they wish, but people will vote councillors out if they increase the precept by too much. £69 is the first-year amount, but the councillors elected in May to the Parish council, will decide to whether it will increase or decrease the next year.

Question: Is there a danger that the West Surrey Council will see it as an opportunity to push costs onto the Parish.

Answer: Parish councils often step in when no one else is doing something. West Surrey will probably start doing less things because for example, people in Ashford up north of the Thames might not want to pay from the council tax for the town museum in Guildford.

Question: Although the Parish councillors are not paid, do they get help?

Answer: The Parish clerk is an employed staff member. There is a nationally imposed cap on how much they can be paid. Also, Parish councils can employ more than one staff member. So, for example, Godalming Town Council employs a handful of admin staff plus some town rangers and park and cleaning staff, and some youth workers for running a town youth service. So, again, they can employ more people, but Guildford Parish would start out with just one town clerk.

Question: I think that Parish Councils are independent, free of party politics. But is it the case that some of the Parish Councils in the borough have become highly party political in their time. A question for George and Jo-are you standing?

Answer: Guildford Liberal Democrats have been clear that, as it is the case in Godalming where it is a party-political council, the party will be putting forward candidates in the Parish Council elections for Guildford. These candidates are living in the wards they represent, and we want to avoid having lots of double-hatters. The residents in Merrow as a Residents Association can decide what they want to do.

Answer: By showing of hands, could you indicate whether the MRA should attempt to identify independent people that allow their names to go forward for possible election for a new Parish Council with support from the MRA.

Clearly members would like us to do so. We will put out an email to our members in due course. There appears to be a clear conclusion in this meeting.

Question: Where will planning decisions come from, and what is the importance or influence of the area committee?

Answer: It is likely that the area committee will also be the planning committee, because for the first five year five or six years of the new council, there will not be a West Surrey Local Plan; there will be a Local Plan for what is currently Guildford Borough.

Question: Is there in the future the need for both the Merrow Residents Association and this New Parish Council?

Answer: Even if the three officially endorsed Residents Association candidates for the Parish elections get elected, those three people are not accountable to the residents until the next election. There will still be a need to represent a Merrow-specific voice on Merrow-specific issues to the wider town council. No member of our executive committee has indicated that they MRA should be wound up. The MRA has got to find every avenue to bring our views to bear on our councillors, on the councils that are elected, and to West Surrey.

3. NEW LOCAL PLAN

- Legal requirement for each Local Authority
- Lasts 15 to 20 years
- Guides future building, land use and development
- Basis for individual planning applications
- Identifies sites for development and community use
- Covers new roads
- Covers protection of specific places and areas e.g. Green Belt!
- All based on national guidance in NPPF
- Lays down new housing numbers set by Government
- Moves from 562 to 1170 new homes per year

Local Plan Timetable

- 5 June 2026: Plan kicks off
- 2 September 2026: Scoping consultation commences- now closed
- 30 October 2026: Gateway 1; date that plan making starts
- 7 April 2027: Consultation on plan content and evidence
- 1 September 2027: Gateway 2; update to planning inspectorate
- 1 March 2028: 3rd formal public consultation
- 25 August 2028: Gateway 3; consult with planning inspectorate
- 29 September 2028: 6-month examination by inspectorate
- 30 April 2029: Adoption Local Plan

Question: How can we talk about building houses when the infrastructure, electricity, water and sewage have not been upgraded?

Answer: The government's set the housing target at the national level and worry about the infrastructure later. The target is set by Government, and the Council has to make the Local Plan by gathering all the evidence about the local infrastructure capabilities and all potential sites. The local grid and Thames Water will wait with accommodating the need for infrastructure when planning is completed. The Local Plan is necessary because if there is no plan for things like the huge development currently taking place at Guildford railway station with the massive tower blocks which was approved by a planning inspector at appeal prior to the 2019 local plan.

However, MRA did underline the importance of infrastructure first in our response to the first Local Plan consultation which has now closed.

4. GREEN BELT REVIEW

Green Belt Purposes

a) Checks unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas
b) Prevents neighbouring towns merging
c) Assists in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
d) Preserves the setting and special character of historic towns
e) Assist urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of district and other urban land

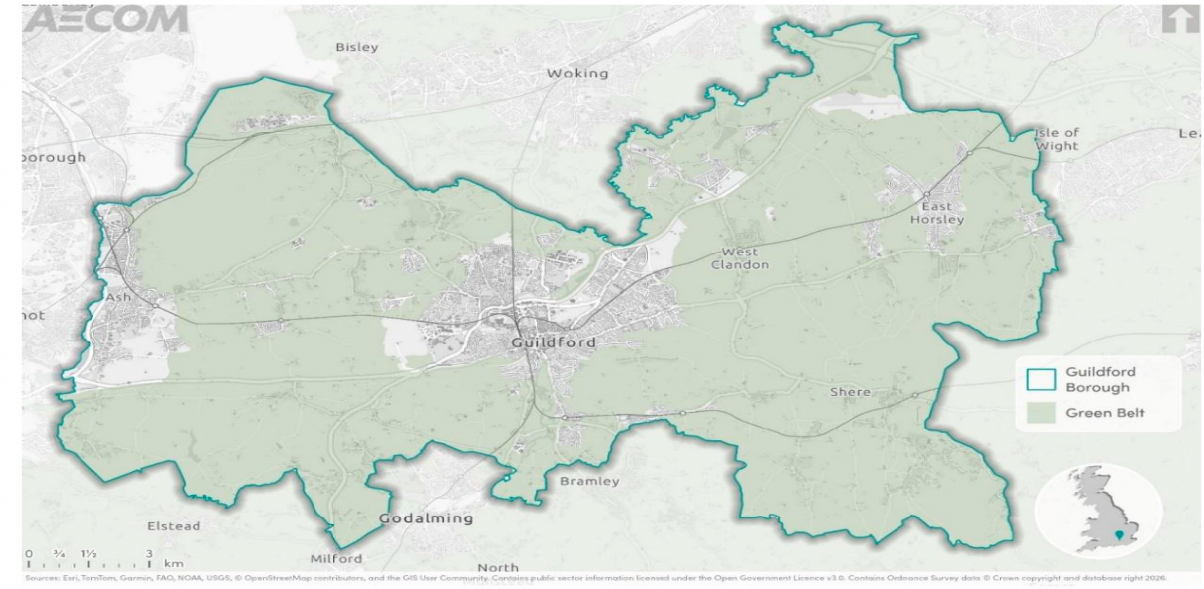


Figure 1-1 Map showing the Guildford authority and its Green Belt

Grey Belt Description

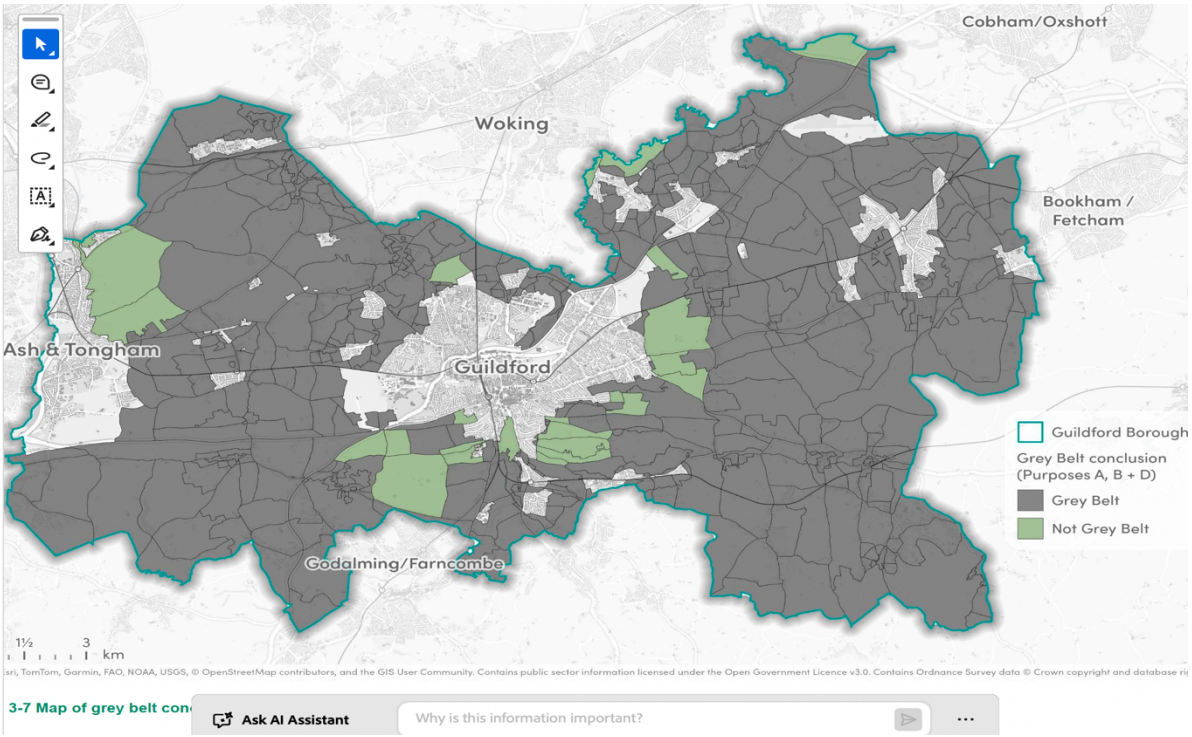
- "Grey Belt" is a national policy term used to describe land that does not strongly contribute to certain Green Belt purposes.
- Grey Belt is a sub-category of Green Belt in planning terms

Three Golden Rules for Grey Belt Development

- Affordable housing that reflects development plan policies
  and
- Necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure
  and
- Provision of new or improvements to existing green spaces

Green Belt Review

- Required by Government under NPPF
- Only categories (a), (b) and (d) are considered in review
- Categories (c) and (e) are ignored
- Not subject to consultation or amendment



- It is one element of the evidence for the Local Plan
- Still need planning consent to build on Grey Belt
- Doesn't override other development constraints e.g. Common Land

The questions and answers in this part of the conversation are all summarised in the bullet point above. In the discussion that followed it was suggested that the review is an odd idea, as most (96%) of the Green Belt becomes Grey Belt. It is noted that Grey Belt status is not an automatic free-for-all: developers must satisfy the three "golden rules" (delivering 50% affordable housing, providing new public green space, and demonstrating proximity to infrastructure). Additionally, statutory designations (Public Commons, SSSIs, and the Surrey Hills National Landscape) provide an independent protection over the land. The Parish Council can accept transfer of ownership of common land such as Merrow Downs and the Riverside Nature Reserve in Burpham to safeguard them against unitary asset sales.