

COUNCIL
Tuesday 31 March 2026 from 10.30-3.30
Lakeside Private Dining Room
MINUTES

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Members:	Chair – External member	Mr Charlie Geffen
	Treasurer - External member	Mr Nigel Jones
	President & Vice-Chancellor	Prof Stephen Jarvis
	Provost and Senior Vice President	Vacant
	PVC Research and Innovation	Prof Lisa Collins
	Chief Operating Officer	Mr Will Davies
	President, Students' Union	Mr Matt Aikin
	Member elected by Senate	Dr Femi Adeyemi-Ejeye
	Member elected by Senate	Dr Charo Hodgkins
	Member elected by Senate	Prof Jin Xuan
	External member	Prof Dame Julia Buckingham
	External member	Mr Nick Gatfield
	External member	Ms Pam Jestico
	External member	Ms Sarah Miles
	External member	Ms Pam Powell
	External member	Sir Philip Rutnam
	External member	Dr Helen Turner
	External member	Mr Philip Whitecross
	External member	Dr Linda Wilding

In attendance: Ms Ros Allen, Head of Governance Services (secretary)
Ms Martine Carter, Vice-President Strategic Growth
Mr Matthew Knight, Chief Financial Officer
Ms Sarah Litchfield, University Secretary & Legal Counsel

By invitation: Prof Tao Chen, Associate Vice President, International (26/031 - 33)
Ms Becca Hill, Director of International Student Recruitment (26/034)
Ms Sarah Leggett, Director of HR (26/035)
Ms Jo McCarthy-Holland, Head of EDI (26/036)
Mr Matt Purcell, Director of Health and Safety (26/035)
Dr Abhijit Sengupta, Dean of GIFT City (26/031 - 33)
Prof Ravi Silva (26/031 - 33)
Mr Jon Ward, Chief Information Officer (26/030)

INTRODUCTORY ITEMS

26/022 Preliminaries

.1 There were apologies from Matt Aikin.

26/023 Declarations of Interest

- .1 Council were reminded that Julia Buckingham had a conflict of interest in relation to the GIFT City Campus item, as she is a non-Executive Director of FutureLearn, which is owned by GUS. Accordingly, while she would take part in the discussion, she would not vote on this item.

26/024 Minutes

- .1 Council **approved** the minutes of the Council meeting held on 5 February 2026 for publication.

26/025 Matters Arising

- .1 The updated actions log was **noted**.
- .2 Will Davies provided an update on the action to consider what metrics could be used to measure whether a “speak up” culture was working. He reported that this was being taken forward through a number of action groups, including the bullying and harassment action group. It was noted that Sarah Leggett would provide a further update under the HR Annual Report item.
- .3 REDACTED

STANDING ITEMS

26/026 Chair’s items

- .1 The Chair provided a briefing on pre-meeting discussions which were focused on the TNE ventures in China and India.

26/027 Vice-Chancellor’s Report on strategic matters and sector context

- .1 The VC presented the paper.
- .2 The Student Group claim settlement by UCL was noted. It was confirmed that the University is not currently party to the claim.
- .3 There was discussion of student recruitment and admissions. The challenges facing international student recruitment, and their potential impact on Surrey, were noted. In relation to admissions, it was observed that the impact of programme changes had not yet been fully felt. EB discussed whether the HE sector was effectively communicating the value of a degree to prospective students. It was recognised that Surrey was better placed than many institutions to demonstrate the value of its degrees, given its Professional Training Year offer and strong graduate employability rates.
- .4 Council noted ongoing work to ensure that the University website is AI-compatible.

26/028 Management Accounts

- .1 Matthew Knight presented the report.
- .2 Council noted the management accounts for February year to date performance, together with the Q2 forecast, and the following key points:
 - REDACTED

- Liquidity days remaining significantly above the OfS minimum of 30 days.

.3 Council further noted that:

- .3.1 Costs in some areas would increase as additional staff were recruited.
- .3.2 Donations were not included in forecasts because of their inherent uncertainty.
- .3.3 Capital expenditure needed to keep pace with requirements.
- .3.4 There had been a significant increase in opex in the current year, more than 10% ahead of budget. This reflected a combination of factors, none of which were considered individually concerning; examples included the reclassification of IT intangible assets as opex and higher reactive maintenance costs as a consequence of lower capital spend.
- .3.5 In the mid-year return to the OfS, the inflationary cost of running the University was reported as 3.3%, largely driven by wage inflation.

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION AND/OR APPROVAL

26/029 Growth Scenarios

- .1 Martine Carter presented the paper.
- .2 Council noted that, following the Council and Executive Board Away Day in November 2025, the University had commenced a high level assessment of strategic growth pathways to support its ambition of becoming a globally competitive institution.
 - .2.1 An immediate priority was to strengthen Surrey's core activity, increasing market share and improving the University's financial position as a result. Business planning was underway, with each area of the University tasked with developing its contribution to this objective.
 - .2.2 As organic growth was pursued, greater emphasis would need to be placed on creating capacity for new initiatives by stopping or reshaping lower priority activity. This would be delivered through:
 - a) portfolio review and the managed withdrawal of programmes in decline;
 - b) a review of pipeline projects and initiatives to discontinue those not aligned with strategic priorities; and
 - c) an assessment of professional services effectiveness and service levels, informed by external sector benchmarking, to identify where effort should be scaled up or streamlined.
 - .2.3 In parallel, and informed by feedback from Finance Committee and Council, further analysis would be undertaken to assess specific inorganic growth opportunities, recognising that organic growth alone would not meet the ambitious targets.
- .3 Council discussed the importance of research to achieving global standing. Reputation – in terms of publications and research income – was identified as critical. The discussion focused on how Surrey could become a partner of choice and position itself to take advantage of available funding, including the need to be clear about the areas in which the University was genuinely excellent. It was noted that a talent acquisition project was underway, with a proposal expected to come to Council in May or July, primarily focused on driving research income. Council asked to see analysis of the impact of the Surrey Future Fellows programme; this was being reviewed. It was also noted that areas of strength in research and teaching do not necessarily coincide.
- .4 Council observed that, if the objective was to become a global top 100 university, not all inorganic growth activities would contribute equally to this goal. The potential for international partnering,

particularly in Europe, was discussed. It was noted that Surrey is part of the CESAER network of technical universities in Europe, which may offer opportunities for closer collaboration.

- .5 Council noted that some significant opportunities for new programmes had been identified. The need to close modules and programmes with unviable numbers was recognised, while at the same time enabling interdisciplinary choices and flexibility. It was agreed that the aim should be to reach an appropriate “sweet spot” between rationalisation and breadth.
- .6 It was suggested that the University might wish to appoint deputy PVCs to support the PVC Education and the PVC Research and Innovation.
- .7 There was discussion of professional services staffing and efficiency. Surrey is currently the second most efficient university in the benchmarked group for professional services, which may limit capacity for further growth. Council emphasised the need to ensure that project costs are understood and visible, and to consider how further efficiencies might be achieved to create capacity, while also creating an environment in which staff can be successful.

26/030 Digital Plan 2030

- .1 Jon Ward attended to present the paper.
- .2 Council noted the key points:
 - .2.1 The challenges and issues were noted.
 - .2.2 The plan was structured around three key pillars:
 - Digital Foundations: Investing in core infrastructure, security, systems of record, user environment, and digital skills to ensure a robust and reliable base for all digital activities
 - Digital Distinctiveness: Leveraging new technologies and approaches to create a distinctive digital ecosystem that supports teaching, research, and campus life, while enabling innovation and competitive advantage
 - Comprehensive Digital Ecosystem: Building an integrated environment that supports seamless user experiences, efficient processes, and the unlocking of organisational data for advanced analytics and AI.
- .3 Council discussed the plan in the following areas:
 - .3.1 Cost of AI tools – It was noted that Surrey had invested in Nebula 1, which is charged based on usage. It gave staff access to many different AI tools, but there may be a need for investment in other models for specific tasks. The associated costs had been built into spending plans, with cautious growth assumed.
 - .3.2 Council noted that the plan had been designed with sufficient flexibility to respond to changes in behaviour and in the external environment.
 - .3.3 The data sets required would be defined and an information management improvement programme established. Staff would be consulted, and there was a plan to set up a digital champions network, including students.
 - .3.4 Council discussed the risk assessment and suggested that risks around obsolescence and user experience should be explicitly included.
 - In relation to obsolescence, it was noted that road maps existed for all the main systems, covering their lifecycle “from cradle to grave”. These road maps were reviewed annually,

and formal relationships were being established between key users and the IT system owners. External consultants were providing further advice on issues such as longevity.

- It was recognised that user experience had not previously been given sufficient priority. Greater emphasis was now being placed on this, and options such as implementing a digital workplace layer over individual systems, to hide complexity, were under consideration.

3.5 The University had set an ambition to be better and faster than other universities in this area. However, for AI and user experience, the target maturity rating had been set at 3/5, reflecting what was considered achievable over a five year period from a relatively low starting point. It was noted that targets would be revisited and reset as appropriate.

3.6 Council noted that there were gaps in capacity and that there would be a need to recruit both fixed term and permanent staff to deliver the plan.

3.7 The value of having a multi-year plan was recognised, and it was noted that the Digital Resource Group would support the management and delivery of the plan.

.4 Council **approved** the Digital 2030 plan REDACTED

.5 Council asked to be kept updated at the appropriate points, potentially via Audit and Assurance Committee.

26/031 Transnational Education - REDACTED

26/034 International Student Recruitment

.1 Becca Hill attended to present the paper.

.2 Council noted:

- the current UK Government position regarding international student visas and its impact on the operating environment for UK universities
- the impact of increased visa scrutiny on the February 2026 intake and the mitigation actions implemented
- the projected impact on the September 2026 intake and the proactive visa-control measures introduced to protect the University's sponsor licence
- the impact of international political unrest on recruitment activity, student welfare considerations and demand patterns
- that the University continues to prioritise compliance with UKVI Basic Compliance Assessment metrics while maintaining sustainable international recruitment growth
- that a further update would be provided following the October 2026 visa performance review.

.3 REDACTED

.4 It was confirmed that all students must continue to meet entry requirements. The Russell Group had lowered entry requirements, which made recruitment more challenging for Surrey. The China market was reported to have contracted, given its focus on QS top 50 institutions. Surrey had sought to maintain its position relative to competitors while preserving quality.

- .5 The complexity of global markets and the wider geopolitical situation was recognised, and Surrey's success to date in navigating this environment was acknowledged. BH confirmed that the International Student Recruitment team had expanded this year following Project 50 investment.

26/035 Health and Safety

- .1 Matt Purcell attended to present the paper.
- .2 Council **noted**:
- that all actions had been completed from the Plant Protection Product Regulations inspection undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).
 - the progress with the action to achieve the target of 95% for mandatory health & safety and fire safety training.
- .3 It was noted that the key software used by the Health and Safety team were:
- The Learning Management System
 - The Incident Management System – the system is out of support but is due to be replaced under the Digital Plan.
- .4 People who do not complete required training were discussed. It was noted that, where mandatory training forms part of probation, staff who do not complete it will not pass probation. For specialised training, such as manual handling, staff who have not completed the training are not permitted to undertake the relevant activity.
- .5 Communication with students regarding the meningitis outbreak was confirmed to be the responsibility of the Chief Student Officer, with Health & Safety also involved. It was noted that all students had been contacted, and that the University had provided Kent with its learnings from its previous outbreak in 2017.

26/036 Human Resources Annual Report

- .1 Sarah Leggett attended to present the paper.
- .2 Council noted:
- The progress made to date in delivering the University's people and culture priorities, as set out in the report.
 - The key insights arising from this period, including the importance of leadership capability, prioritisation and visible follow-through in supporting colleague engagement and performance.
 - That people and culture considerations will continue to be integrated early into the development of the University's five-year growth plan.
- .3 Council noted the need for the People and Culture Enabling Plan to be developed more comprehensively into a focused and practical plan, structured around five key priorities:
- how we enable our leaders to lead well
 - how we recruit the best people

- how we retain the best people
- what we will do to strengthen the leadership pipeline
- how we can use people and culture levers to influence outcomes

- .4 Council commented that the engagement measure appeared low, although the staff survey response rate in October had been 79%. It was suggested that morale may be a more important indicator. Council discussed how engagement was tracked and whether the KPI could be enriched, for example by including a set of new questions in the survey to assess organisational health, and by benchmarking against the sector where possible. A strong action plan had been developed in response to the survey, and it would be run again in the autumn.
- .5 It was noted that bringing in new groups of staff, such as Future Fellows, needed to be communicated and managed well, as it can have a significant impact on other academic staff motivation.

26/037 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report and 2030 Plan

- .1 Jo McCarthy-Holland attended to present the paper.
- .2 Council noted the progress made in the EDI 2020-25 Closure Report and the further work to be done in certain areas such as harassment and bullying and sense of inclusion and belonging.
- .3 There was discussion of bullying and harassment, with the following points noted:
- There is a clear definition of bullying, defined with reference to both intent and impact.
 - While people know how to report bullying and harassment, they do not always come forward, partly due to a lack of confidence in the system.
 - Work is underway to provide better information and build confidence in the process.
 - The Bullying and Harassment Working Group would monitor the data in this area on a quarterly basis.
 - The impact of events in the wider world on behaviour was recognised, such as increased antisemitism in the context of recent events in the Middle East.
 - The University always seeks to provide space for discussion and to avoid pitting groups against each other, instead focusing on meeting needs and maintaining strong stakeholder communications.
 - The University has 25 chaplains who play a key role in this area.
- .3 It was noted that the University had a dual duty both to uphold free speech and ensure that staff and students feel safe.
- .4 Council considered progress on the EDI Plan. The shift from predominantly compliance based work to more activity based work was noted, together with the four strategic themes and associated enablers. Plans for data tracking were highlighted, focusing on representation, progression and culture/belonging, and the resource implications were acknowledged. The EDI Executive Committee will set and review targets annually. Local EDI targets were discussed. The Chief Student Officer has established a governance group to identify priorities, and Faculty EDI committees are reviewing what is needed within their Faculties.

- .5 Council noted that research culture funding is likely to come to an end within the next year. Work is underway to embed good practice at local level so that it can be sustained beyond the funding period.
- .6 Council noted that awarding gaps were a sector wide issue. The Access and Participation Plan focused on this and included a number of activities to address awarding gaps, although it was recognised that small numbers and participation patterns make this complex. Social mobility is not a protected characteristic but does feature in the Access and Participation Plan for students.
- .7 The representation of staff with disabilities was considered; 7% of staff at Surrey have declared a disability, compared with an estimated 13% in the wider population. Council queried whether there might be cultural barriers to disclosure. It was noted that, in an ideal world, disclosure would not be necessary, but that there has been an increase in disclosure rates. Council was advised that mandatory disability pay gap reporting is expected in a few years' time, so it will be important to improve the quality of disability data.
- .8 Council noted the great progress and the strong leadership from Jo McCarthy-Holland and **approved** the EDI Plan 2030.

26/038 Nominations and Governance Committee Report

- .1 SJ presented the paper.
- .2 It was noted that the Honorary Degrees Committee required an additional external member, and Council members were invited to volunteer if they were interested. Council was reminded that all members should feel able to propose nominees for honorary degrees. It was noted that the criteria for the award of honorary degrees would be reviewed.
- .3 Council approved the following recommendations:
 - 1. the Pro-Chancellor role description
 - 2. amendments to the Ordinances to remove reference to Pro-Chancellors being able to act as Vice-Chancellor and to put cover arrangements in place for the University Secretary
 - 3. that Surrey should maintain a pool of four Pro-Chancellors
 - 4. that the person in the role of Chair of Council should be appointed as a fifth Pro-Chancellor
 - 5. that Pro-Chancellors should be able to serve a maximum of two four year terms
 - 6. that full due diligence should be carried out on future Pro-Chancellor and external Council appointments
 - 7. commencing the recruitment process to replace Pam Jestico, who is stepping down at the end of July 2026
 - 8. moving the Council Awayday to September, to be held alongside a Council meeting
 - 9. spacing Council meetings more evenly across the year.

26/039 Remuneration Committee Report and Terms of Reference

- .1 PP presented the paper.

.2 Council noted the discussions on matters including succession planning.

.3 Council **approved** the amended terms of reference.

C ITEMS FOR INFORMATION ONLY

26/040 Consumer Protection Task Group Annual Report

.1 Council noted the report.

26/041 Treasury Management Annual Report

.1 Council noted the report.

26/042 Committee reports

.1 Council noted the reports from Executive Board, Finance Committee and Senate.

D CLOSING ITEMS

26/043 Any Other Business

.1 None

26/044 Date of next meeting

21 May 2025

Mr Charlie Geffen, Chair