

Surrey borough kicks up a stink about stink

11 December 2023



More than 200 tankers of human poo were shipped in to Camberley from across Surrey, Hampshire and London, saving Thames Water millions in potential pollution fines and its sewage trucks from “exploding”. This comes at the expense of 11,600 residents who got nothing in return, save for a summer of vile stench, a committee heard.

Chiefs from the utility firm were called in to Surrey Heath Borough Council to answer questions as to how 12,000 cubic metres of raw untreated sewage and sludge was left to fester in the heat – forcing thousands of people to stay inside with their windows closed during the summer.

The committee also challenged water bosses over pledges they thought had been made on compensation to Camberley residents who “bore the cost” so the company, which recorded a total revenue of £2.3 billion last year, could profit.

Councillors said they were led to believe Thames Water would contribute towards a playground as a goodwill gesture to children who had been forced to stay indoors, with committee chair, Councillor Rob Lee, going as far as to say Thames Water should offer “a year’s free water bills” to those affected.

Thames Water’s representatives said they never made a firm commitment to contribute to any scheme. The company claims they have made organisational improvements since.

The committee heard that Thames Water could not have made any offers of goodwill as the people attending the meeting did not have the power to do so.

In the end, Thames Water’s leadership offered to let staff have a charity day to support building a local project that never got off the ground.

The sewage started being shipped into Camberley Sewage Works in February this year and by March the two 6,000 cubic metre tanks were “completely full”.

At the time, the committee heard, odour suppression was in place but it wasn’t 24/7 and didn’t cover the entire tank, which also suffered from maintenance issues.

By June, the council began to receive formal complaints. Initially the council was told the problem was due to blockages and drainage.

It took until the middle of July for Thames Water to publicly admit it was a holding tank with a “large quantity of sewage sludge within it”. It would remain untreated until the beginning of August with the tanks finally cleared and cleaned of waste on September 25.

Speaking to the committee was operations director James Bentley. He apologised “unreservedly” and said: “We didn’t get everything right in that process and we’re not here to pretend that we did.” He said the firm should have put in odour controls in place and communicated with residents much sooner. He said: “We had been experiencing a very extreme sludge event...where our system across the whole of the Thames Water estate, was overloaded. Not only with liquid sludge but also with cake which is the solid material when we process sludge and remove a chunk of the water from it. That system was overloaded on the liquid and solid side.”

Thames Water staff told the meeting it left them with no choice but to put liquid sludge into reserve tanks. Mr Bentley said: “It has to go somewhere, it can’t just be discarded into the environment. We have to store it until we are able to treat it.” His colleague added: “If we didn’t move the sludge we’d have pollution trucks potentially exploding, and that’s why we’d done it.”

Cllr Rob Lee said: “You act in the shareholders best interest, you don’t intend to cause a substantial sewage leak unless it’s a commercially managed one, you don’t intend to cause a Health and Safety Executive incident, so what you did was you moved the sludge to Camberley. So the people that bore the cost of that were the residents of Camberley, substantially through the summer, through their loss of enjoyment and I think it’s understanding the loss position those residents bring.

“They are your customers, they pay you money, and they missed out substantially on the enjoyment of their summers. Raw sewage smell around your home is pretty different to that in a treatment plant as that is your job. You need to consider a gesture of goodwill to residents. A starting point is a year’s complimentary water bill. It clearly saved Thames Water in material terms millions if not tens of millions of pounds, so I think we need to start exploring that avenue.”

The two hour meeting concluded with the Thursday, November 28 executive partnerships select committee agreeing to formally ask for a “decision maker who has the ability to sign off on compensation” to appear before the next meeting, in March.

The council’s executive team will also write to regulators Ofwat, MP Michael Gove and the environment secretary to ask them to consider the wider sense of pollution and whether Thames Water diverted the risk of fines by increasing the air pollution in Camberley.

Image: Thames Water Meeting (Surrey Heath BC)

Poorest will pay for a Council's mismanagement

11 December 2023



Vulnerable people are set to bear the brunt of service charge rises after **Woking Borough Council's** executive committee agreed to inflation-busting increases. People who receive community meals or extra care facilities will be asked to pay more, as will users of community alarms.

The day-care services, which were previously free, run from The Vyne and St Mary's Community Centre are to be moved to Brockhill and Hale End Court and cost £20 a day. The daycare charge would not include the cost of transportation which is currently undertaken by Woking Community Transport - which in itself is under threat given its loss of funding.

The hit is being forced on residents after Woking Borough Council declared itself effectively bankrupt in June this year, with an unpayable deficit of about £1.2 billion and debt set to soar to £2.6bn. It meant all services the council was not legally obliged to provide would have to pay for themselves.

Other increases recommended for approval included garden waste fees rising by almost 50 per cent to £70 per bin, and community hall fees jumping by 20 per cent.

Decisions on big ticket items, such as Pool in the Park, and parking charges, are still to come as the council awaits consultation results and is not expected until the new year.

Introducing the measures to the Thursday, November 16, meeting, was Councillor Dale Roberts, portfolio holder for financial planning. He described service charges as "a bit of a political football but this is also not like any other year." He said: "This must be done while reducing, removing, the subsidy from discretionary services effectively delivering them cost neutral such that they are affordable, sustainable to this council."

Leader of the council, Councillor Ann-Marie Barker said: "These are non-statutory services, they are services the government doesn't require us to provide. We provide them because they are good and useful services to residents but if we want to continue to provide them we've got to cover the costs, we've got to make them cost neutral. But affordability has to be a key measure as well because we may be impacting people who can't afford to pay them." She added: "It's not easy but it's symptomatic of the situation we find ourselves in."

Opposition members raised flags over the lack of detail in the papers, stating it made approving blanket increases difficult as there was no way to know the extent that they were needed. This was agreed by the executive who said the problem was deep-rooted and part of the council's long-term problems.

Cllr Roberts said that officers have worked very hard but that he recognised "that there is missing information, things we would all like, that are just not there". He said: "Councils don't fail because they get into financial difficulty they get into financial difficulty because they failed. The fact that we are absent of some of the information we absolutely need, critical to moving forward, is because this council has failed, its broken."

A formal vote will be taken by a full meeting of Woking Borough Council. It is due to sit on November 30.

The Vyne, Woking (Image Google)

No way to discharge bankrupt Council

11 December 2023



Bankrupt Woking Borough Council is spending up to £148,000 a year on free charging for electric vehicles – about the same it would cost to save the “Bustler” community bus service.

The great electric give away at the Red Car Park in Victoria Square is happening, it emerged, because antiquated IT systems mean the council is powerless to charge people who use them.

It has led to calls for the electric vehicle charging stations to be switched off immediately in the hope the money could be used for community projects that are struggling with funding cuts as the council grapples with its near £2.6bn debt.

The shocking figure was uncovered during the Monday, November 20, Overview and Scrutiny Committee when officers were grilled on budget overspend over electricity costs for the Red Car Park in Victoria Place which “had not been budgeted for resulting in an estimated overspend of £148,000”.

Councillor Kevin Davis (CON, Heathlands) said: “What on earth is going on in that car park that’s racking up electricity charges of 148 grand?” He was told the money was going to the council-owned Thamesway account as part of its decentralised heat network – which ultimately provided power for electric vehicle charging points in the car park.

Officers told Cllr Davis they were aware the council was “not able to financially charge, sometimes we’re not (even) able to electrically charge” because the “back office systems that support the EV charging system are not in place”.

Cllr Leslie Rice (LD, Heathlands) said: “Somebody is getting free charging.” He added: “This has come out in a meeting. We talk about transparency and good management practices and we’ve turned over a new leaf, this doesn’t look like it. Someone from one side of the political divide picks up on something and it’s built on and built on and it’s not a good picture. It does not reflect well on council officers, this should be disclosed and it shouldn’t be dragged out this way in the meeting.”

It comes less than a month after the chief executive of Woking Community Transport warned of ‘dark days’ ahead after learning its service agreement was under threat as part of £11m of cuts the council must make to balance its budget.

The door-to-door community transport, known as the yellow Bustler service, helps take people with mobility issues to day centres in the borough.

The council, which declared itself bust in June, has to stop spending on all services not classified by the Government as essential.

Cllr Davis said: “ This is just a shocking example, and it’s been dragged out by accident, and now we have to come up with a solution. We should be looking at stopping people getting free electricity.”

Cllr Rice added: “£148,000, I think £150,000 is the Bustler grant that we’re talking about. There are so many different things we could do with £150,000.”

Finance lessons for Parliament from Surrey Boroughs

11 December 2023



Surrey Heath Borough Council is burning through its reserves and eyeing up serious cuts to services, the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee was told. The Monday, November 13, cross-party panel of MPs heard from experts including from the National Audit Office, the Institute of Fiscal Studies, and chief financial officers of local councils as it delved into the ‘financial distress in local authorities’.

Among the group giving evidence were Paul Dossett, from Grant Thornton the forensic accountants deep-diving into Woking Borough Council, Jonathan Carr-West, of the Local Government Information Unit, and Surrey Heath’s chief finance officer Bob Watson.

The committee was also told a lack of professional accountability among senior officers - across all councils - has been a driving factor behind local authorities running into financial trouble - and has been made worse with many scared to stand up against councillors for fear of losing their jobs.

Mr Watson said: “ (Surrey Heath) is not in immediate financial distress, it is like many other councils, predicting a use of reserves over the medium finance period and the burn rate on those reserves is unsustainable into the medium and long term future.”

He told the meeting of the “challenging budget process” the council was going through, including looking at cutting non-essential services. He said: “We have over the past two and a half years embarked on a number of efficiency measures where we’ve taken costs out of the organisation without cutting services to the residents and business in Surrey Heath. It is potentially now likely we will have to look at some of the discretionary services. We also have over the past built levels of ear-marled reserves for very such cases where we’ve started to see some of these higher interest rates coming through. We plan to use those reserves to smooth the gap over the four years. Sufficient reserves to take us through the four years but it is challenging.”

Part of the reason, the committee heard, for councils struggling to balance the books has been a 61 per cent cut in funding, which has had the knock on effect of increasing demand for services - notably in housing and homelessness.

Mr Watson told the committee that the cost of living crisis has impacted on people paying private rent and who were now presenting as homeless. He said: “We in our borough haven’t seen it quite the same (levels of homelessness) as some of the other Surrey boroughs but we’re starting to see that increase. Last month’s statistics of people presenting to our council offices actually doubled- again driven by cost of living pressures on individuals. We have the cost prices going up with hotels, we have the cost of hotels going up driven by demand going through and were now starting to see some of the hotels closed by central government these people now presenting to the local authority as homeless.” He added that it was not just a refugee crisis as people have been struggling to find affordable homes for years.

Earlier in the session the committee heard from Grant Thornton’s Paul Dossett. Grant Thornton works with about half the councils in the UK and is completing a deep dive into how Woking Borough Council went bankrupt with debts approaching £2.6billion. Mr Dossett told the committee that local government financing “just bumbles along with no attempt to fix it” and when councils do go bust its the most vulnerable, the ones who rely on council services the most, who are impacted.

He said: “Some of the things that have gone wrong, what we have seen with some of those people responsible from an officer side, in those key roles, the golden triangle of chief executive, monitoring officer and section 151 officer, there hasn’t really been professional accountability. There may have been job accountability in that the person has moved on to a different place but the sort of professional accountability of someone not doing their job to the right professional standard we don’t really see that in any meaningful way. Alongside that there needs to be better job protection for statutory officers to enable those statutory functions to speak very clearly to members to say ‘you can not do this’

“That is either breaking the law, or involves a degree of financial risk that the Section 151 officer is not comfortable with, and should be able to say that without any fear that there will be comeback against you in that role.”

Surrey Borough flushed with pride

11 December 2023



Toilets in Waverley have reclaimed their thrones as some of the country’s best bogs after inspectors released their results from unannounced lavatory visits.

Two watering closets in Waverley Borough Council’s parks have achieved Loo of the Year status. Broadwater Park, in Farncombe and Frensham Great Pond and Common have been awarded platinum status - honours they held from 2017 and 2019 respectively. The Waverley washrooms were the only in Surrey to have secured nominations.

Councillor Steve Williams, Waverley Borough Council’s portfolio holder for environment and sustainability, said: “Clean, well-managed toilets are very important for those visiting our sites and I would like to say a big thank you to our contractors and staff who do such a great job keeping them up to such a high standard.”

According to Loo of the Year organisers, the awards encourage the highest possible standards in all ‘away from home’ washrooms and inspectors make unannounced visits to toilets across the UK and Ireland to judge them.

Acceptable toilets are graded silver, gold, platinum or diamond and are held up against a number of criteria, including décor, cleanliness, hand washing equipment and accessibility.

The awards have run since 1987 and are considered the ‘washroom standard’ with overall winners across the 61 categories announced on Thursday, January 18.

Related reports:

The Cost of Spending a Penny: a review of Epsom and Ewell's public toilet provision.

Famous 16th Century Surrey pub saved, for now?

11 December 2023



A 16th century pub in the heart of the **Surrey Hills** has been saved from developers after plans to convert one of the last remaining Abinger watering holes into houses, holiday-let pods, and a new bar area were thrown out.

Mole Valley Borough Council's planning committee met on Wednesday, November 1 to hear proposals from developers, **JPW Osprey**, to turn the Volunteer pub in Sutton Abinger, near Dorking into self-catered holiday lets.

The plans were voted down eight to six as councillors sided with resident groups, formed to save the pub, as well as **Abinger Parish Council** which had lodged formal objections.

Addressing the meeting was **Paul Clever** who was part of a community group that had raised £600,000 in a failed bid to purchase the pub and save it. He said: "The aim of this application is to close the Volunteer, replace it with an unviable alternative which gets through planning. The new entity will last as long as needed to prove that it is not viable and the developer will then sell the asset for multiples of what it cost."

He added: "The Volunteer is being closed and the new layout and proposed service will ensure the new venture in the new area will fail. The planning application and the planning report refer to the pub being unviable and that is simply not true. The Volunteer Community Group has proof of this for the year preceding the sale, during the worst trading conditions ever for publicans.

"The Volunteer is viable and very precious to its community, known far beyond the boundaries of Surrey. It should not be allowed to go the way of so many other pubs near and far, especially when there are so many people willing and able to make it work as a public house and community facility."

The pub sits on the western side of Water Lane within the hamlet of Sutton Abinger, close to the boundary with Guildford. The land is designated Metropolitan Green Belt, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Area of Great Landscape Value.

The surroundings, the officer report said, "lend the pub an engaging verdant setting and areas of the garden afford views over rolling wooded countryside to the south taking in attractive historic properties, some of which are listed."

The Volunteer had been owned and operated by the Dorset-based brewery, Hall and Woodhouse, until 2022 when it closed and sold to the applicant.

In November 2022 the pub was listed as an Asset of Community Value having been nominated by the Abinger Community Pub Group as a building that furthers the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community.

Speaking on behalf of the application was **Simon Best** who told the meeting it was the best way of bringing the pub back in use. He said: "Change is not always a bad thing and it is clear from previous failures that diversification is needed to ensure the Volunteer can run as a viable entity. Holiday lets will support and enable the pub to continue."

Councillor **Margaret Cooksey**, who moved that the plans be rejected said: "If they kept the public house building as is and used what is going to be the extension as accommodation that would have made much more sense. They have got it the wrong way round. It would have been better a different way round and hope they take note of that and come back with a better proposal next time round."

She added: "They've got it horribly wrong".

Image: The Volunteer Pub (Mark Davison)

Surrey police station futures

11 December 2023



No decisions have been made on the long-term future of Caterham or Reigate Police Stations as proposals put forward “are not fit for purpose” and “cost-prohibitive”.

Front-desk services returned to Caterham, after a five-year absence, as an emergency measure following the discovery of dangerous crumbling concrete nine miles away and on the other side of the M25 at Reigate Police Station.

The problem was uncovered after Surrey Police began searching their estate for Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in September as the national emergency spread.

RAAC concrete can collapse and crumble without notice. It meant the force had to shift staff and officers out of Reigate including moving front-desk counter services to Caterham, and close CCTV monitoring.

Three weeks after the discovery, there is still no timetable to return, nor any updates on whether the switch will be made permanent.

A spokesperson for Surrey Police said Caterham remained operational and had previously housed a front-counter service but closed in 2018 to save money as part of a wider review into funding.

It was deemed expendable, the force said, due to a “decrease in footfall of front counter services”.

They have yet to confirm whether the counter will stay in Caterham long term, move back to Reigate, find a new home completely, or shut.

They said: “It seemed sensible to reinstate it at Caterham as it was once there until a long-term solution is found for the eastern division headquarters. Adding: “The front counter at Caterham Police Station will remain open until further notice, and we will update local residents as soon as any longer-term decisions have been made. The priority has been to maintain policing services while ensuring the health and safety of our officers, staff and visiting public.”

As for Reigate, Surrey Police said they have explored a number of options for the continued use of either the whole or specific parts of the building, however, the proposals that have been put forward are not fit for purpose either for staff, or for victims to be able to report crime, and are also cost-prohibitive.

Related reports:

Reigate Police Station closes with a concrete problem

[Surrey Police’s counter service in Epsom is located during normal business hours only within the Town Hall, The Parade, Epsom. Reigate Police Station’s counter-service was open full-time, so from now out of hours personal attendances will have to go to Caterham or Staines or Guildford.]

Surrey College fraud probe leads to housing plan

11 December 2023



Warnings a failed subcontracted apprenticeship scheme was a “major risk” were ignored leaving a Surrey college with a £25million financial time bomb that it now hopes to solve by selling land for 320 homes.

Brooklands College in Heath Road, Weybridge, borrowed a large sum from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) with the money given to SLC Security to run apprenticeship programs at the school between 2011 and 2019.

When SLC Security collapsed, a formal review was launched by the Department for Education’s further education commissioner – and soon after Scotland Yard began its own three-year fraud investigation which closed in May with no arrests – leaving the college holding the can.

The school’s solution has been to look to sell land to developers Cala Homes for a £45 million project to cover the money it owes to the ESFA and a modernisation of its campus. The planning application is due to be decided by Elmbridge Borough Council in November, potentially drawing the saga to a close.

In the months leading up to SLC’s collapse concerns of the school’s financial health had already caught the attention of the Department for Education and the college’s “capacity and capability” to get out of the mess, questioned.

The commissioners said the subcontract was a “major risk” and recommended the college “undertake further work to

understand the risk associated with this contractor and to immediately review subcontracted provision”.

The school’s governors, on the other hand, told commissioners they had been given “numerous assurances” by the principal and chief executive over the college’s financial stress testing and auditing of its subcontractors which “showed no issues regarding eligibility, existence of learners or their employment status”.

At no point had any thought had been given by governors to develop a Plan B should the investigation find the college financially liable for any failings, the report read.

The college’s senior leadership team and governors at the time believed “they had undertaken all necessary and appropriate checks and due diligence on all sub-contracted SCL Security provision and from the work they have done, believed that the risk of clawback was low” according to the commissioners’ report.

A spokesperson for the Department for Education said it does not comment on individual cases but that colleges are required to ensure any education subcontractors adhere to regulations.

They added: “In all cases where apprenticeship provision does not meet the funding regulations it is standard procedure to recover those funds.”

A liquidators’ statement for SCL Security published on January 4, 2023, revealed that colleges and the ESFA have claims worth £22.5 million against the company. However, it shows there is only about £6.5m available, far short of how much the college must return to the ESFA.

Brooklands College also plans to seek damages for breach of contract, although this will require “further work” to adjudicate.

A spokesperson for the Metropolitan Police said: “In June 2020, the Metropolitan Police received an allegation of fraud relating to a college based in Heath Road, Weybridge, Surrey. The allegation related to financial transactions between 2011 and 2019. An investigation was undertaken which included assessing all available evidence and speaking to staff at the college. No arrests were made in connection with the investigation. In May 2023 a decision was taken to close the investigation and the college has been informed of this outcome.”

A three-year repayment plan is now in place between the college and the ESFA. The college has also put in place a new leadership team and is working with Cala Homes on a joint planning application. The £45million scheme, the college says, will enable its Grade II listed mansion to be refurbished and restored, open 12 hectares of woodland to the public, provide a community-accessible sports centre, as well as the 320 homes – 128 of which will be classed as affordable housing.

The public consultation into the plans closed on October 23 with 235 people voicing their support for the project against 22 letters of objection.

A spokesperson for the college said: “A new leadership team and a revitalised Board of Trustees have been focussed on putting the college on a solid, long-term, financial footing and have developed a plan to repay the debt and safeguard the college’s future. Our plan will upgrade our teaching facilities to create a modern learning environment that will meet future educational needs, inspire the next generation of students, and secure a sustainable future for Brooklands College in our community.”

Image: Visualisation of completed Brooklands College campus site (Cala Homes/Elmbridge BC)

New home needed for disability theatre group

11 December 2023



A performing arts charity that won the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service has been made homeless after crumbly concrete was found in the hall it had called home for the past 17 years.

Freewheelers in Leatherhead is on the lookout for a new base – ideally one suitable for its disabled theatre and media company members.

On Tuesday, October 17, the group was forced out of its **Bridge Centre** base after the dangerous Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) which can collapse in an instant and without warning was discovered throughout the building’s roof.

For safety reasons, the building cannot be used nor accessed by any groups, according to **Surrey County Council**.

Posting to Facebook, the Freewheelers charity said: “We are homeless and sending out an SOS!

“Freewheelers are looking for a new home in or around Leatherhead. Do you know of an accessible space or spaces, suitable for our disabled theatre and media company members? We need spaces for dance, drama, film making and music

on Mondays, Tuesdays and Friday mornings.”

“We are a diverse and creative company of people with disabilities based in Leatherhead, Surrey. We work alongside directors, producers, composers, artists and writers, to co-create and produce engaging, thought-provoking, funny, joyous and highly entertaining theatre, dance, film, and music.

For over thirty years we’ve been a force for change and artistic excellence in the world of Disability Arts.”

Freewheelers website.

Survey work is being carried out at the Clare Crescent site and Surrey County Council has confirmed that it is also actively helping the search for a new suitable location for the group while the centre is closed.

A spokesperson for the county council said: “We have been in constructive dialogue with the Freewheelers Theatre and Dance Company this week so that we fully understand their requirements. We are currently working at pace alongside Freewheelers to help find a suitable location for them to use while the Bridge Youth Centre is closed.”

They added: “The closure of the youth centre will allow further investigations to take place so that we can be assured the building is safe. We understand that the short notice closure of the Bridge Youth Centre may be challenging for groups that use the building and the residents they support. However, as residents would expect, safety is our top priority.”

Other groups who regularly use the Bridge Youth Centre have been offered temporary alternative accommodation, the council said adding that they were working to ensure anyone who may need to access equipment or items stored in the building will be able to do so safely.

They said “At present, as the discovery of RAAC in the building is very recent, we need to carry out further inquiries before we can provide any details on proposals to deal with the RAAC or timelines for re-opening.”

Image courtesy: Freewheelers

Thames Water left human waste to fester

11 December 2023



Thames Water has been accused of backtracking on a goodwill gesture after subjecting Camberley residents to a “disgusting” summer of stench caused by raw, untreated, human waste left to fester in the heat.

Last summer Camberley experienced a “persistent and intolerable” rancid odour the seeped from sewage works operated by Thames Water, a full meeting of Surrey Heath Borough Council heard.

Following a series of meetings, with councillors and MP Michael Gove, Thames Water spoke of its desire to make a financial contribution to a local community project to acknowledge the impact on residents over a five month period, according to a motion that was backed unanimously by councillors.

Introducing the motion was Councillor Jonathan Quin, leader of the Labour group and ward member for St Michaels. He said: “Disgusting sewage odour... plagued Camberley for over a five month periods from May to September. The odour caused by the Camberley sewage works run by Thames Water can not be described as anything minor. It was so awfully disgusting and strong that many residents...could not open their windows or hang their washing outside during the summer.

“The distress and impact caused to mental health... has been shocking.” He added: “Thames Water agreed to meet with councillors and the MP to discuss possible compensation to make up for missing five months going outside.”

The meeting heard that a children’s playground in St Michaels was suggested as a goodwill gesture and that there had been a “meeting of minds” with the utility firm, with the only thing remaining being the exact amount of money Thames Water would put forward.

He said: “Rather than agreeing to meet us in person again, Thames Water has since backtracked on its decision to make a contribution. I’m absolutely disgusted and disappointed at the disregard shown.”

Cllr Lisa Finan-Cooke (LD, Watchetts) told of how the problem began after Thames Water started shipping in human waste into Camberley that led to more than 11,000 complaints to flood in.

She said: “Between February and April more and more sludge was imported on to the site, and let’s be honest what we are talking about was raw human sewage which was just stored in vast open tanks to just fester away, and as the weather

warmed up, the sludge began to produce an unbearable odour.”

She added: “That’s five months of people feeling sick in their own homes, of not wanting to open their windows, of not letting their children out to play in their gardens, not being able to hang their washing out to dry, cancelled birthday parties and family events. The site wasn’t sufficiently resourced to process the sludge in the first place.”

The Wednesday, October 25 meeting noted the problems caused by Thames Water and called on the private utility firm “in the strongest possible terms” to honour its previous commitment to make a financial contribution to a community project.

It was also agreed to write Thames Water and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to express dissatisfaction over the importation of sludge to Camberley.

Camberley Sewage Treatment Works (Image Google)

Play streets coming to Epsom and Ewell

11 December 2023



A closed-street scheme is being launched in Epsom to “get more children away from their ipads and TVs and actually play outside”.

A ‘play street’ for Miles Road was approved by **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** after residents pushed for temporary closures so their children could play outside.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, chair of the community and wellbeing committee, said: “More than 90 local authorities have introduced the Playing Out scheme in their areas, and I’m really pleased to see this initiative come to Epsom and Ewell. “We believe the scheme will help support the mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing of children and the community by creating a safe and inclusive space for everyone to play in and by fostering a much needed sense of neighbourliness.”

The scheme has already been adopted by neighbouring Elmbridge Borough Council.

Playing Out is a not-for-profit organisation set up by parents in 2009 with the aim of getting young people out and about more freely.

The schemes, which have the backing of Play England, allow for streets that are not a main road or bus routes to be closed to through traffic for up to three hours.

Play streets are resident-led and need the agreement of neighbours. They are designed to give children the freedom to play outside and bring communities together.

Volunteers steward the roads and parents are responsible for their own children.

Applications to become a play street are handled by the same council team responsible for street party road closures.

Addressing the October 10 meeting, Cllr Woodbridge said: “We’ve looked at it and wherever it’s been adopted there has been some significant benefits and it’s a useful scheme.”

He told the committee the decision would be reviewed in a year to determine what, if any, changes were needed. He added: “But it’s quite valuable to get it up and running. “One of the most important things is to let our residents know that they can do this. “It would be great to get more children away from their ipads and TVs and actually play outside.”

As part of the application process Surrey County Council and the emergency services are notified of any road closures.

Cllr Chris Aimes (Lab, Court Ward) said: “I and my fellow councillors from Court Ward are very much in favour of this.”

Reigate Police Station closes with a concrete problem

11 December 2023



Officers and staff are being moved out of Reigate Police Station following the discovery of dangerous crumbly concrete inside the building. The move leaves CCTV of public spaces in Mole Valley unmonitored.

The public-facing police counter will also move to Caterham Police Station from Monday, October 30. Surrey Police said it carried out an investigation of its buildings for the presence of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in September after the national scandal broke following its discovery in schools.

No specific timeframe is provided for how long officers will be moved from Reigate, as it depends on finding a permanent resolution for the issues with the building. The Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend said the move would be “A challenging time for our policing teams.

Structural engineers confirmed RAAC was used in the construction of Reigate Police Station. Distressed RAAC can suddenly collapse with no apparent warning. The majority of the dangerous concrete at the station is said to still be in good condition and is not an immediate risk but one external area was showing signs of distress – Surrey Police said in a release issued after questions from the Local Democracy Reporting Service.

The force immediately relocated staff and officers from the area in immediate danger, on the advice of engineers, to elsewhere in the police station, and installed supports to reinforce the roof. According to Surrey Police, this has now been signed off and can be reoccupied.

Engineers have also been instructed to carry out weekly checks on the rest of the station in order to allow its neighbourhood policing team to operate out of the station “until a longer-term solution can be found”. The public-facing police counter will move to Caterham Police Station from Monday, October 30.

The station also monitors the public spaces CCTV camera for Mole Valley District Council. Surrey Police said it will no longer be able to continue this service with discussions ongoing over “potential technical solutions”. A public consultation has also been launched on the future provision of CCTV in the area.

Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend: “I want to reassure our local communities across East Surrey that plans are already in place to ensure the policing service they receive will not be affected by the situation at Reigate Police Station. The safety of the public and our officers, staff and volunteers must be the most important consideration and I fully support the prompt action being taken by the force to vacate the majority of the building.

“This, of course, is a temporary measure, and my office will work closely with the chief constable and his team to ensure that we can find a long-term solution for the future of our Eastern Divisional HQ as quickly as possible. This is a challenging time for our policing teams based at Reigate, but they are incredibly resilient in the face of adversity, and I want to thank them all on behalf of the public for their patience and understanding whilst we deal with this issue.”

Other police teams will work remotely or from alternative sites where possible. The police insist the changes will not impact service levels expected from the force.

Temporary assistant chief constable for local policing, Alison Barlow, said: “The health and safety of our staff, officers, volunteers, and the public is of paramount importance and the force responded swiftly following the identification of RAAC at Reigate Police Station.

“In the short-term some teams, including our Neighbourhood Policing Teams, who spend much of their time away from the police station patrolling and attending calls for service, remain in the area of Reigate police station with prop-supports in place whilst longer-term options are explored, and those teams who are office-based and can work remotely or from another police site are being supported to do so.”

[Surrey Police’s counter service in Epsom is located during normal business hours only within the Town Hall, The Parade, Epsom. Reigate Police Station’s counter-service was open full-time, so from now out of hours personal attendances will have to go to Caterham or Staines or Guildford.]

Thames Water rebate

11 December 2023



Thames Water has been ordered to pay back more than £100million to its customers by regulators.

Water watchdog Ofwat ordered the under-performing company to return the money following a string of failings, it announced today, September 26.

The rebate follows its assessment of Thames Water’s performance with customers seeing the results on their bills next year. Ofwat’s decision was published in its annual Water Company Performance Report, which rates companies based on pollution incidents, customer service and leakage.

Targets are set to incentivise water companies to deliver more for customers and the environment, Ofwat’s report read. It added: “Where they fall short, we reduce the amount of money companies can collect from customers.” On Thames Water customers receiving £100 million back next year, it said: “While that may be welcome to billpayers, it is very disappointing news for all who want to see the water sector do better.”

David Black, Ofwat chief executive said: “The targets we set for companies were designed to be stretching - to drive improvements for customers and the environment. However, our latest report shows they are falling short.” He added: “It is not going to be easy for companies to regain public trust, but they have to start with better service for customers and the environment. We will continue to use all our powers to ensure the sector delivers better value.”

It is yet more bad news for the firm following the report in July that found Thames Water among worst in country due to standout levels of pollution and poor monitoring left it joint last among the country’s “very disappointing” water and sewerage companies.

Thames Water is the largest water company in the country and serves 15 million people including many in Surrey and Kent. It is owned by a consortium of pension groups and sovereign wealth funds and, in 2023 reported an annual loss of £30.1 million.

Environment Secretary Therese Coffey has now written to Thames Water informing it to expect a meeting in order to scrutinise its improvement plans.

A spokesperson for Thames Water said “Our customers expect a great service from us every time, and we’re sorry when we fail to deliver at the first opportunity. In 2022-2023 , we met 55 per cent of our annual performance commitments.

“While it is our job to deliver our services whatever the weather, our performance last year was severely affected by the summer drought and December freeze/thaw event. In March this year our shareholders injected £500million of new equity into Thames Water to help fund improved operational performance. Our shareholders are willing to provide a further £750million of equity funding before 2025, subject to certain conditions.

“They also acknowledge that additional equity funding, indicatively of £2.5billion, will be required during the next regulatory period, 2025-2030, to further improve operational performance and financial resilience. This is the largest equity support package ever seen in the UK water sector and underscores our shareholders’ commitment in delivering Thames Water’s turnaround and life’s essential service for the benefit of our customers, communities, and the environment.

“Our turnaround is already delivering performance improvements. Our complaints fell by 28 per cent, the second consecutive significant year-on-year reduction and we have seen improvements in several key performance commitments including a reduction in sewage discharges, internal sewer flooding, and sewer blockages.

“We’re making progress and we’ll continue to engage and work with Ofwat as we implement our plan. We’re determined to do better for our customers and the environment.”

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Image: Hogsmill river in Ewell where there were sewage leaks.

Another Surrey Local Plan Pauses

11 December 2023



The towns, villages, and open spaces that will take the brunt of **Surrey Heath Borough Council's** 6,000 new homes will be kept under wraps a little longer after the local authority kicked its housing plan into touch.

It is the second time this year the council has paused its local plan after announcing in February it would hold off until after housing secretary **Michael Gove's** long-rumoured but never seen planning changes take effect.

Now the council is blaming the "economic climate" and the need to develop a strategy for Camberley town centre - which has been hit by the £79 million loss in value of the Camberley Square and House of Fraser sites.

It has said it will now "review the timetable for the remaining stages of the Local Plan process, known as the Local Development Scheme".

Surrey Heath Portfolio Holder for sustainable transport and planning, Councillor Alan Ashbery said: "The council is committed to delivering the best local plan for our residents, while giving maximum protection to our highly valued green belt and special protection areas.

"Given the current economic climate, more time is required to review key policies and undertake further work to support the development in Camberley town centre. Once these important pieces of work have been completed, a new local development scheme will be published. This will set out dates for the remaining stages of the process, including publication details prior to submission to the Secretary of State."

The original draft in February was to deliver 6,213 homes up to the year 2038 - with more than 1,000 lined up for green belt sites. That left 2,700 homes, once those that had already been granted planning permission but had yet to be built were discounted.

The council's draft outlined where housing could be built - this includes employment, commercial, recreation and green spaces and was drawn up following consultation with residents and businesses in 2022.

After the February delay, it was due to submit a final draft for consideration in November 2023 but this has now been delayed again, the council said, to allow further work to be carried out.

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Image: ffaalumni CC by ND 2

Gove gives Tandridge a severe telling off

11 December 2023

Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

David Ford
CEO
Tandridge Council
Oxted
Surrey
RH8 5BT

Via email only

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and
Communities
Minister for Intergovernmental Relations

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and
Communities
4th Floor, Fry Building
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London SW1P 4DF

16 August 2023

Dear David,

I write following a finding of severe maladministration by the Housing Ombudsman for your failure to abide by duties under the Equality Act 2010 or act in accordance with your own safeguarding policy.

An "extremely vulnerable person" with poor mental health suffered "aggressive" and "intimidating" behaviour at the hands of **Tandridge District Council** staff.

The unacceptable behaviour has led to the secretary of state for communities, **Michael Gove**, to write to the council to formally warn that he be taking "a personal interest" in how it delivers for residents.

Levelling Up secretary Michael Gove wrote to the local authority after an investigation by the local government watchdog found the behaviour of a housing officer amounted to severe maladministration.

According to the **housing ombudsman's** report, the resident as well as an independent mental health advocate said the housing officer's approach was "aggressive and intimidating" and that "she had never been spoken to in that manner in all her years in the role".

This carried on until the housing officer left three months later.

The ombudsman ordered the council to apologise to the resident in person, pay £1,000 in compensation and review its Vulnerabilities and Reasonable Adjustment policies.

Mr Gove, writing to Tandridge Council's chief executive David Ford in August 2023, said: "I write following a finding of severe maladministration by the Housing Ombudsman for your failure to abide by duties under the Equality Act 2010 or act in accordance with your own safeguarding policy. In this case you failed an extremely vulnerable resident.

"Her case was not referred immediately, as it should have been, to the relevant support services. The behaviour of a member of your staff towards both the resident and the mental health advocate supporting the resident was described as aggressive, intimidating and neither appropriate nor solution focused.

"This is not acceptable. Your residents should expect their concerns to be taken seriously, for reasonable adjustments to be made where appropriate, and that an investigation of any complaint should be fair. Residents, particularly those who are vulnerable, should expect that their needs are understood and acted upon."

He added: "I will take a personal interest in how you deliver your responsibilities to your residents."

Richard Blakeway, housing ombudsman, said: "At the heart of this case, there were three different officers involved, but none took appropriate action. Failure to appropriately respond to the resident's requests for reasonable adjustments or to act in accordance with its own safeguarding policy caused serious detriment.

"The failure by the landlord to demonstrate that it had taken steps to ensure it understood the needs of the resident also led to missed opportunities which adversely impacted the resident. On top of this, there was a complete absence of recognition, acknowledgement or apology from the landlord for its failings, or to take any action to put things right."

Responding to Mr Gove was Councillor **Catherine Sayer**, leader of Tandridge District Council. She said they recognised there were problems in how the council dealt with the long-running case, which stretched over several years, and that they failed to fully consider the resident's needs and vulnerabilities.

Cllr Sayer said: "We are sincerely sorry for the distress and inconvenience caused. Compensation was paid to the resident and we continue to work with and support them with their future needs.

"In January 2023, the Ombudsman did acknowledge several reasonable adjustments were made during the handling of the case." She said the council had also learned from its mistakes and will put all customer-facing staff into refresher training on safeguarding, vulnerability, equality and diversity and requirements for reasonable adjustments.

Among the changes the council has since made include a staffing structure review as part of a council-wide programme to ensure a dedicated housing officer is assigned to a case and that each case is reviewed monthly by senior officers.

Tandridge Council has also appointed a resident engagement manager to oversee supporting those with vulnerabilities. Cllr Sayer added: "In addition, we made a referral to the Regulator for Social Housing who was satisfied with the response and action we have taken and they did not require us to take any further action."

Another Surrey Borough with serious money problems

11 December 2023



Epsom and Ewell Times has reported on the woes of Woking, the gaps in Guildford budgets and we have spelt out the thorny financial crisis of Spelthorne. Now Surrey Heath may move to asbestos lined offices to preserve its existence. These crises contrast with **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** that consistently balances its books. **Chris Caulfield** reports:

Surrey Heath Borough Council could close its headquarters and move into the vacant, asbestos-lined House of Fraser site as it tries to get out from under its "existential crisis" of its "sheer levels of borrowing".

It comes as the council's leader **Shaun Macdonald** said the borough was as little as two years away from effective bankruptcy.

The council is seeking ways to cover its £176m debts and has launched a project to look into the relocation of civic offices – and papers published as part of its Thursday, September 14, performance and finance scrutiny committee suggest it is considering moving staff into the vacant House of Fraser building in Camberley.

Surrey Heath Borough Council bought the House of Fraser building in 2016 for £18m. The store closed its doors in May 2023 with the lease expiring in August 2023.

Today the building is said to be worth just £2.9m and requires “multiple millions of pounds” to refurbish. House of Fraser closed the branch in Park Street in May.

The council says it has been working on alternative plans for the building, “including complete modernisation and refurbishment, improved retail and hospitality areas, offices and community facilities such as health and civic uses”.

According to council documents, it has been negotiating with commercial tenants for the entirety of the third floor, as well as the entirety of the ground floor, and half of the first floor.

“The second floor could be a potential location for Surrey Heath Borough Council’s relocated office and the remaining half of the first floor for a relocation of Surrey County Council’s library.”

It could make the move as early as 2026.

Commenting on the council’s treasury management activity report during the same meeting, Councillor **Richard Wilson** (LD, Bagshot) said: “It seems pretty obvious that the council has effectively an existential challenge because of just the sheer level of borrowing we’ve got. “This all stems back to 2016 when those failures in decision making on oversight and scrutiny but I wonder if there has also been a failure in treasury management in the period after 2016 while interest rates were still low?”

He also asked whether the loans could have been handled in a “different” way the council could have avoided the “existential crisis” it has now.

Details of the potential move were published as part of the council’s property and economic development service performance report.

A spokesperson for the council said: “In common with many buildings of this age, asbestos is contained in the fabric of the former House of Fraser building, which is safe if not disturbed. “This would need to be removed by specialist contractors as part of any future plans.”

House Of Fraser Camberley (Image: Google Street View)

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