

Thames Water’s reputation going down the drain

3 February 2024



Thames Water’s spending on infrastructure is “woefully inadequate”, its behaviour a “disgrace”, and direct lines of communications to MPs “unhelpful” – a meeting into the “largest ever” water outages in “recent history” heard.

Last November tens of thousands of homes in and around Guildford and Godalming were left without water when the utility company failed to deal with the impact of Storm Ciarán. Some 20,346 homes were cut off for more than three hours, and 14,520 for 12 hours or more hours – including hospitals and schools.

So far Thames Water has paid out £1.7million pounds in compensation to those impacted.

The outage led to chaotic scenes as people became increasingly angry with the privately owned water company, with reports of staff and volunteers being verbally abused and spat at.

Addressing the Tuesday, January 31, meeting of Guildford Borough Council’s overview and scrutiny committee was Thames Water’s Paul Wetton. He said it was “By far the largest ever we’ve had to manage in recent history”.

The utility company, which reported an 11 per cent increase in its underlying revenue in its interim 2023/24 accounts to £1.2 billion, needed up to 16 tankers to prop up the network in order to feed water directly to cut off hospitals during the outage. It also delivered 750,000 litres of bottled water to customers described as “priority”.

Thames Water’s Tess Fayers acknowledged the huge disruption and apologised for all the impacted homes, businesses and other critical operators such as hospitals and schools that were cut off. She said: “I’m also aware that there is also a sense of heightened unease about the water supply with a number of issues being raised to us recently which can’t be very helpful to the community. We are here because we are committed to putting things right. We want to make sure we do the right thing by the community and provide you with a constant supply of water.”

Guildford is prone to water problems. All the water available to residents is on a closed network. So if there are problems, extra resources cannot be brought in. Most of the water that goes into the network comes from the ground with the remaining 40 per cent drawn from rivers before being treated for human use. Daily demand sits at around 50 megalitres, the equivalent of 50 million bottles of water. The system essentially runs at maximum capacity with new water being drawn in to replace what is going out. When the power at the processing plants went down during Storm Ciarán, that process stopped and the water ran dry.

People on the tops of hills were impacted first and the last to be restored. Capacity in Guildford is so tightly packed that it’s difficult to find the capacity to enable the investment, the meeting heard.

Tess Fayers said: “Communications were bland, lacked technical information that we should be more bold putting forward.” She added: “Not telling our customers does not help and leaves more people in the dark. Another thing we learned, in all honesty, it’s sometimes unhelpful to have a line of communications running between ourselves and potentially a member of parliament – which doesn’t always allow us to manage the message in the best possible way.”

To improve matters, the meeting heard, an “enhanced” leadership team has been put in place and investment is being made, although capacity issues complicates the matter.

Councillor Danielle Newson (LD, Tillingbourne) said: “Your infrastructure spending is woeful completely inadequate. Telling us you can’t actually tell us what you know is just disgraceful when we are paying your bills and your bonuses.”

Deputy leader of the council, Cllr Tom Hunt, said: “I just wonder how many residents in Guildford or Waverley would choose Thames Water today.”

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3 February 2024



A Surrey borough where the house prices are “amongst the highest in England” has been ordered not to delay its home building programme. The Epsom and Ewell neighbour borough of **Mole Valley District Council** was ready to pull the plug on its planning bible – which sets out the development it would allow to meet its housing targets.

The council was to debate informing the planning inspector of its decision to withdraw its draft local plan but a last minute intervention by the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities has ruled this out. Instead the council agreed to continue working to set out clear guidelines for developers.

In a letter to the council outlining his decision, **Lee Rowley, Minister of State for Housing**, Planning and Building Safety, said: “I am writing to you over concerns that Mole Valley District Council may withdraw the emerging local plan from examination. The Government is clear that local plans are at the heart of the planning system, and it is essential that up-to-date plans are in place and are kept up to date.”

He said: “Each local planning authority must identify the strategic priorities for the development and use of land in the authority’s area, and policies to address those priorities must be set out in the local planning authority’s development plan documents such as the local plan.”

The last time the council had an up-to-date plan was in 2009 and work on its replacement has begun in earnest. Withdrawing now, Mr Rowley said would extend the council’s time in limbo. He said: “Withdrawing the plan from examination would be a clear failure by the council.”

Since Mole Valley District Council’s last masterplan, more than 90 per cent of all English local authority plans have been updated – pulling out now would leave the borough with “one of the oldest adopted local plans in the country”. It has left the council operating under out-of-date policies, given the amount of change in the 14 years since it was adopted.

Mr Rowley added: “Housing affordability is a significant problem in Mole Valley and the ratio of average house prices to average wages is amongst the highest in England. I can therefore conclude that there is higher housing pressure. Considering the average time taken to prepare a local plan is seven years and we are approaching the phased introduction of a new planning system, withdrawing the plan at this stage could only lead to significant further delay whilst a new plan is prepared. Intervening would therefore accelerate plan production given the current plan is submitted and at examination.”

The order to proceed with the plan will remain in force until formally withdrawn by the secretary of state.

Councillor **Margaret Cooksey**, Cabinet Member for Planning said: “The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Building Safety has today [January 25] issued Mole Valley District Council with a direction not to withdraw its local plan from the examination-in-public at the Council meeting tonight. Previous to the new direction, three options had been available to MVDC: Withdrawal of the plan; continuation of the plan, as submitted (including Green Belt sites); request that the planning Inspector change the plan to remove all Green Belt sites.

“This new direction takes option A away from us and requires Mole Valley District Council to report monthly to the Minister’s officials on the progress of the examination. It will remain in force until the examination concludes with the Inspector’s report.”

How far will £500m go for Surrey Councils?

3 February 2024



Additional government funding for local councils will “go some way” towards easing the pain felt by local authorities struggling to balance their books – although calls remain for greater reform.

Communities Secretary Michael Gove announced that English councils would get a share of £500m for their social care grant, and a share of £100m increase in core spending power.

It comes amid a backdrop of councils facing difficult financial times, with Woking declaring itself effectively bankrupt, Runnymede being served a Best Value Notice, and Surrey County Council admitting it would need to make serious cuts and increase tax by the maximum allowable in order to have a legal budget.

Further pressure has come after a letter from MPs pushed for the extra cash ahead of this year’s general election. In a written statement on Wednesday, January 24, Mr Gove said the extra money would enable councils to provide “crucial social care services for their local communities, particularly children”.

Councils have also been told their funding guarantee, the minimum annual increase available to all authorities would increase by a percentage point, from 3 per cent to 4 per cent, something Mr Gove described as a “key ask” from district councils. He said: “We have listened to councils across England about the pressures they’re facing and have always stood ready to help those in need. This additional £600 million support package illustrates our commitment to local government. We are in their corner, and we support the incredible and often unsung work they do day-to-day to support people across the country.”

Surrey County Council leader, Councillor **Tim Oliver** (Conservative), is also the chair of the network of county councils. He said the announcement would “go some way to easing the pressures and in particular address the escalating demand and costs of delivering social care and home to school transport. Whilst this extra funding will undoubtedly help us protect valued frontline services, councils, of course, still face difficult decisions when setting their budgets for 2024/25.”

He called for the reformation of local government finance and to how services were provided adding: “Councils require a long-term financial settlement to enable us to plan for, and meet, the demand from our growing elderly populations and the more complex needs of residents requiring social care. This must be coupled with a comprehensive reform programme to bring in line the funding envelope available to enable us to deliver effectively our statutory responsibilities.”

The majority of the funding is ringfenced for social care – this is a service usually provided by top-tier local authorities – in this area it is provided by Surrey County Council.

The £500 million pounds announced by Government is to cover all top tier local authorities in England.

According to Surrey County Council’s most recent set of accounts, it alone spent £727m on Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture, and a further £680 million for adult social care.

For smaller local authorities such as Woking Borough Council, which has debts of about £2 billion, the extra funding from central government works out to be about £152,000 a year, the Local Democracy Reporting Service understands.

Additionally, the four percent announced increase is below the current rate of inflation which at the time of writing was 4.2 per cent – meaning the offer, while better than before, is still a net loss for local authorities.

Deputy Leader of Woking Borough Council, Will Forster said: “We welcome this additional financial support announced by the Government yesterday. This goes some way to filling the funding gap in local government. The majority of this funding will go towards meeting the increasing cost of delivering adult social care by county and unitary councils, whilst we expect the remaining funding to go towards district and borough councils, like ourselves, to alleviate the impact of rising inflation and increased demand on our core services.”

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Surrey Police funding: not a fair cop

3 February 2024



The “outdated” underfunding of Surrey’s police is “unfair” to residents according to the May 2021 elected Conservative Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner **Lisa Townsend**.

The Government announced its funding for police forces in England and Wales in December saying they would receive £18.4 billion – up £922 million on the previous year. But the way that money is divided has meant some areas received significantly larger shares than others, prompting Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend to write to the Government.

Surrey’s funding will be £308.7m in 2024/25, an increase of up to £17.3m when compared to 2023/24. Her letter, to the minister of state for crime, policing, and fire, **Chris Philp**, was seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service. It read: “Whilst being thankful for the additional resources that have been made available to policing, I am concerned about the way these have been allocated.

“Once again rather than being allocated in proportion to costs incurred i.e., for pay linked to headcount or payroll costs, these grants have been allocated using the outdated formula grant model. This is a particular issue for Surrey where only 45 per cent of our total budget is covered by grant compared with over 80 per cent in Northumbria. This means that Northumbria gets 77 per cent more of the additional pay grant for the same level of cost compared to Surrey.

“I did write to you about this when the pay grant was originally announced, and you assured me that the allocation method would be changed but so far this has not happened.”

In Autumn 2021, the Government announced it was to review how funding was distributed. It has since been engaging with the police sector to determine policing demand and the impact of local factors on forces. Two and a half years later that work remains ongoing with the Government saying the existing model remains the fairest way to allocate core funding to maintain officer numbers and avoid financial uncertainty.

A Home Office spokesperson said: “Our priority is to deliver a robust formula that allocates funding in a fair and transparent manner, ensuring that police have the resources they need. So far, a total police funding settlement of up to £18.4 billion in 2024-25 has been proposed and Surrey Police is receiving up to £308.7m. “We have engaged closely with the policing sector on an evidence-based assessment of policing demand, and the impact of local factors on forces. This work remains ongoing.”

Lisa Townsend said: “In December last year, I wrote to the policing minister in response to the settlement for policing which included the recent pay award for officers funded by the government. Our policing teams go above and beyond on a daily basis to keep our communities in Surrey safe and this pay award was richly deserved. I believe it will help in Surrey Police’s efforts in a tough employment market to recruit and retain police officers against a background of rising costs and better paid jobs in the local area.

“However, in my letter I did raise concerns about how these additional resources have been allocated using the current funding formula. This model is outdated and remains unfair to the residents of Surrey. We receive proportionately the lowest level of formula grant in the country meaning we will receive a smaller grant to cover the pay costs compared to other forces.

“Throughout my term as Police and Crime Commissioner, I have been committed to fighting for fair police funding on behalf of our residents and I will continue to lobby government for a change in the current formula.”

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Surrey’s debts match Woking’s but its position is secure?

3 February 2024



Surrey County Council expects to add a further billion pounds in “additional” debt to its balance sheets but experts have praised its financial sustainability and suggested it is better placed to cope with any potential issues.

The council currently has about £1.3 billion in capital financing requirements and has forecast this to surge to £2.4bn by 2028/29. It expects to fund much of this through borrowing.

According to its own figures the council has an estimated borrowing limit of £1.06 billion which it forecasts will grow to £2 billion by 2028/29. It will do this, it says by borrowing an additional £1.24 billion over that time frame.

The finances were presented to Surrey County Council’s Audit and Governance committee on Wednesday January 17 and comes as data found Surrey councils were racking up some of the biggest debts in the UK.

Analysis from the Shared Data Unit shows Woking Borough Council topped the charts owing £1.95bn as of September 2023 – working out at about £19,000 for every resident, the highest in the country. Spelthorne was second with average debts of £10,415, per person and Runnymede fifth, on £7,270 with the Public Accounts Committee warning that these massive debts posed a risk to local services.

Addressing the meeting was council officer Nicola O’Connor. She said: “The table does demonstrate an ongoing commitment to capital expenditure by the council. Our capital program, to be approved in the coming weeks, remains ambitious and remains significant in terms of our capital investment over the next five years. That does result in an anticipated increase in our borrowing. We will manage that and review actual spend compared to forecast before we undertake borrowing.”

She added: “There is an expectation that the borrowing of the council will increase in the coming years in order to support and finance that ambition in the capital program.”

Surrey County Council lost £27 million from the value of its capital investments in 2023. The finance model continues the same line the council has managed in the past with no significant changes. It sees the continuation of its plan to “maximise our internal borrowing and to balance the long and the short term debt portfolio in order to manage that cost of carry”.

Surrey County Council borrowed an additional £79m in 2023. This is forecast to rise by a further £156m this financial year, with further sums of £372m, £360m, £193m, £129m and £131m added in debt in each of the following years until 2029 – bringing the total additional borrowing for £1,18 billion.

If the plan is followed through the council’s capital funding requirement would grow from £1,3bn to £2,4bn – bringing it almost in line with bankrupt Woking

Borough Council which declared itself effectively bust last year.

It would also mean the council would be spending £59m a year to service the debt through minimum revenue protection payments. Overall the council's financial health remains bullish, considering the serious risks other local authorities were in.

Paul Dossett of accountancy firm Grant Thornton told the meeting that, although the council was not immune to financial challenges hitting local authorities across the country, it had the support in place to better navigate them. He said: "It's a very very strong position and you have the right mechanisms in place". He added: "Your strong governance is linked to the fact that your financial sustainability is in a better place than some other councils. Your strong arrangements for aching value for money is linked to the reasons of your financial sustainability.

"I'm not downplaying the challenges you face. because you face some... but overall it's a very strong report it will be absolutely in our top quartile at least for these types of reports this year."

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Surrey's £1/4 m fines for failing children

3 February 2024



The failings of Surrey County Council's children services has meant the under-fire authority paid more than £250,000 in fines, compensation, and redress payments to families it let down last year. The settlements are published by the social care ombudsman and last week it upheld three more complaints. The education watchdog found Surrey County Council continues to miss deadlines, and create needless delays for children waiting for psychological assessments and GP advice.

The latest rulings meant the authority had to payout a further £1,700 to families with an ongoing £100 a month to one - as an acknowledgement of the "ongoing uncertainty and distress" until a final care plan is issued.

The total paid to families for 2023/24 will likely be published from April but the most recent full year figures showed the county council could have saved itself thousands of pounds - had it got things right.

The council sets itself a target of responding to 80 per cent of initial complaints within 10 working days - though this can be extended to 20 days with its children's, families and lifelong learning department.

In children's services only 59.4 per cent were within timescale.

The figures are even worse for education and home-to-school transport at just 44 per cent and 56 per cent respectively.

The Annual Complaints Performance report read: "Where fault is found following a complaints investigation, financial redress can be recommended where appropriate. All financial awards are approved by the relevant head of service and, if greater than £1,000, in consultation with the relevant cabinet member.

"The Ombudsman can also recommend financial redress if they find fault following an investigation.

"During 2022/23 there has been a significant increase in both the number of complaints attracting a financial remedy and the total amount paid of £258,730.53. This equates to an increase of £166,032.51 when compared to 2021/22."

Of the payments, the council said, £87,445.65 was paid in symbolic financial remedies to recognise the impact of the fault identified, for example distress and anxiety and time and trouble taken in pursuing the complaint. The balance of £171,284.88 was primarily reimbursed costs to address missed provision which it says were "essentially funds that the council would have needed to spend to meet assessed needs irrespective of a complaint being made."

Councillor Clare Curran, Surrey County Council cabinet member for children, families and lifelong Learning: "We are not able to comment on any individual children specifically, however we take the findings from the Ombudsman very seriously and apologise for the distress these families experienced.

"I am aware that the Council has not always got things right and that the support and service that some children with additional needs and disabilities and their families receive is not always of the standard that we would expect, and I am sorry about that. We are working hard to improve services, and a recent Local Area SEND Inspection noted progress is underway.

"Despite national pressures we regret all delays and are working hard to reduce any backlogs, and ultimately to reduce spend on fines, which we know is higher than it should be. We have taken several actions to address this including securing an additional £15m of funding to increase the capacity of key teams, extending the use of locum and associate educational psychologists, commissioning external providers for support, and increasing advertising to fill positions.

"A multi-agency recovery plan is also in place with short-term and long-term goals, which Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspectors noted had identified areas that need improving and that actions by the local area partnership to address these are starting to make a difference. We know that communication with parents and carers is an area in need of focus and plans are being developed to address this as a standalone priority workstream within the refreshed Surrey inclusion and additional needs -partnership strategy.

"We are constantly reviewing how we support young people who are unable to attend school, and are implementing our £180million capital programme that is increasing the availability of, and access to specialist provision. We also recognise the significant issues that confront the SEND system nationally. We have seen a 64 per cent increase in education, health and care needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, at a time of a national shortage of Educational Psychologists (EPs).

"We are doing our utmost to recruit more to meet this demand, and we are filling this gap as best we can. We have already been able to halve the backlog of EP advices through the steps we've taken locally, but we hope to see the national shortage in trained EPs and other issues addressed soon through the government's improvement plan.

"We remain committed to improving our services and outcomes for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future."

Drills in the Hills lawful

3 February 2024



Oil drilling near the Surrey Hills can proceed after the Court of Appeal dismissed a legal challenge to stop fossil fuel extraction from Dunsfold.

Climate emergency campaigners are still hopeful that the fight is not over – despite running out of road as far as court challenges are concerned.

UK Oil and Gas (UKOG) originally applied for planning permission to sink exploratory wells into land next to the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 2020. The plans were refused by Surrey County Council but overturned by the Secretary of State the following year.

The legal labyrinth continued when a further appeal, launched by Waverley Borough Council and Protect Dunsfold, won the right to a Judicial Review in March 2023.

When this failed to overturn the decision, Protect Dunsfold applied for permission to appeal the findings. On Tuesday, January 9, a judge found they had no chance of the decision being changed and refused them the right to carry on appealing through the courts.

Oil firm UKOG hailed the decision as being “fully in keeping with the government’s hydrogen, energy security and net zero strategies”.

Its chief executive Stephen Sanderson said: “We are pleased that Lord Justice Stuart-Smith has once again dismissed the legal challenge to our Loxley project and has confirmed that its planning consent is entirely lawful, as the company and its counsel has maintained. We believe that a successful project will be beneficial to local and national level energy and economic interests and is fully in keeping with the government’s Hydrogen, Energy Security and Net Zero strategies.”

Law firm Leigh Day represented the campaign group. Their solicitor Ricardo Gama, said: “Protect Dunsfold are extremely disappointed by the Court of Appeal’s decision not to allow their appeal to go ahead. Their appeal would have tested whether a government minister was right to grant planning permission for gas exploration in Dunsfold when on the very same day he refused planning permission for gas exploration in Ellesmere Port because of the amount of greenhouse gas that would be emitted.

They say that that decision makes a mockery of the planning system because Ellesmere Port would involve less greenhouse gas emissions than Dunsfold.

Though defeated in court, it may not be the end of the battle as the some of the access land surrounding the site is owned by Waverley Borough Council and any moves to make it wider – in order to accommodate large vehicles needed to drill and transport oil could need council permission.

Waverley Borough Council has consistently expressed opposition to plans for oil and gas exploration at Loxley Well – which is home to Red Listed birds and other protected species.

The council has also said drilling at the site would have “disastrous consequences for the community, local wildlife and the wider landscape”.

Councillor Steve Williams, Waverley Borough Council portfolio holder for environment and sustainability, said: “At every stage in the long and tortured history of this planning application, local people have demonstrated their overwhelming opposition to any exploration for hydrocarbons at Dunsfold. If drilling goes ahead there will be damaging impacts on the landscape, wildlife, local businesses and residents, while nothing to the local economy.

“More importantly, it simply kicks the can of the climate emergency further down the road. We are living through a time of unprecedented climate impacts and need an immediate shift in national policy away from fossil fuels. We are either serious about addressing global heating, or we’re not.”

Councillor Paul Follows, Leader of Waverley Borough Council, said: “Onshore extraction of fossil fuels is totally incompatible with the Climate Emergency declared by Waverley Borough Council, Surrey County Council, and our national government. The UK needs to rapidly increase our investment in renewables, where we are in danger of losing our position as genuine world leaders.

“We should focus on energy generation by cost effective and sustainable methods such as solar and offshore wind, and stop ripping up the Surrey Hills in pursuit of oil and gas. The judgement today is bad for local communities, bad for the local environment, very bad for the planet and sends a message to future generations that we simply don’t care about them.”

Image – illustration only

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Dorking Halls to get refit

3 February 2024



The “jewel in Mole Valley’s crown” is set to shut over the summer as it undergoes a £3.24million safety refit. Dorking Halls has been recommended for the “minimal” amount of work needed to fix its most immediate problems. A decision on an £8m modernisation of the venue with improved seating, bars, toilets, and sound proofing will be taken next year.

Councillor Nick Wright, cabinet member for leisure and tourism, told overview and select committee at Mole Valley District Council: “The halls are a very important part of Mole Valley’s cultural infrastructure, with over 114,000 tickets sold in 2023. They are used by residents from across the district and beyond. “The halls are sorely in need of repair and refurbishment and the particular concern is over the state of the 90-year-old fibrous plaster ceiling in the great hall itself.

“This has to be dealt with urgently as a health-and-safety issue and it also costs us a lot in inspections and remedial patches. We absolutely have to avoid any chance of a forced unscheduled closure of the halls for safety reasons.”

Initial studies into the work began in 2022 with three ideas put forward. The first is the minimal safety work, the second an enhanced program to upgrade stages, access and bar areas. The final, which was ultimately not considered, was an aspirational complete remodelling.

The halls would need to close in summer 2025 as well; if the council agrees to go ahead with the second phase of works. The primary focus of the first phase will be to make the ceiling safe. Critical ceiling failure has been identified as a risk. If no work is done, there is the potential that the fibrous plaster in the Grand Hall becomes so unstable that the halls are forced to close at short or no notice.

Any collapse, regardless of whether the public were in attendance, would likely lead to a fine. The report read: “The priority is to address the ceiling at the earliest opportunity, to avoid the risk of being forced to close the Grand Halls to the public at short or no notice, with the associated reputational damage, and financial consequences of cancelling events, refunding ticket sales, and compensating for loss of profit.”

It has been about 30 years since the halls last underwent a large-scale refurbishment, when the building was extended and the current layout created.

The cinema was made digital in 2010 with other minor works also carried out. Cllr David Draper described the work as well deserved and necessary.

Officers told the meeting the site is compliant but that it “struggles to accommodate some shows” with adjustments and limitations enforced which often means performances are restricted, or not the full versions performed in other venues.

The meeting on Wednesday, January 3, heard: “We have to cut things to make it safe and workable so it’s not presenting a danger, it’s just a bit limiting and we’re only just managing.” Cllr Wright said: “Dorking Halls is the jewel in the crown of Mole Valley but its getting a bit tired, it needs a polish, and it needs to look much better than it does at the moment.”

The plans were then signed off later that night during a brief, 30 minute long, extraordinary cabinet meeting.

Homeless child will have his day in court

3 February 2024



The High Court has granted a judicial review into Surrey County Council’s decision not to house a “child in need”. In 2019, a 17-year-old who was known to Surrey’s social services team was on the verge of being made homeless.

Surrey County Council caseworkers, who the judge praised, said the teen required the highest level of intervention together with a co-ordinated multi-agency approach. These are reserved for cases where children are in serious need. However, when he applied for emergency accommodation, the council’s housing team said they were forced into a “snap judgement” – something the judge dismissed.

Mr Justice Calver rejected the county council’s claim that their decision was made against the clock and found they had a “duty to provide him with accommodation”. The judge said he was “well known to Surrey County Council with his history of children’s services involvement”, and that the council had already made considerable enquiries about his needs and welfare.

He added it was “clearly the case that... suitable emergency accommodation...was required, whilst his full needs, including his need for continuing accommodation and support, were further assessed.”

Following the county council’s decision the teenager, now 22, began to “sofa surf” between friends and family until he eventually ended up homeless and living on the streets.

Justice Calver’s judgement read: “Despite this, Surrey County Council inexplicably failed to provide (him) with any accommodation and indeed failed to take any steps to assess his case at all until September 18, 2019, being five days later, which is highly regrettable.” He wrote: “It is plain in my judgement that as at September, 18, 2019 it was or ought to have been clear to Surrey County Council on the facts as known to them that he could not return home, and did not otherwise have stable, suitable accommodation. Instead it merely recommended a referral to its targeted youth support.”

Justice Calver also said that, given the background of the young man’s situation, and how well known he was to Surrey County Council it was “extraordinary that on October 28, 2019, Surrey County Council nonetheless closed his case.”

The judge said that while there was “no doubt” he had a “caring and diligent social support worker” it was “clear that Surrey County Council as an organisation seriously failed” him. He said: “I do not accept the submission of Surrey County Council that no purpose would be served now in granting the relief sought by this claim,” adding “the support he receives from his supported accommodation key worker is being stepped down over time, and is accommodation-based.

“He still requires but cannot access support to return to college, access vocational training, plan his future and manage his social anxiety, all practical challenges which he struggles with owing to the lasting effects of his childhood.”

The judgement, handed-down on Friday December 15th granted the man permission to bring his claim forward for review.

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said it does not comment on active court proceedings.

Surrey social landlord downgraded by regulator

3 February 2024



Problems with repairs, service charges, complaints, damp and mould, contributed to one of Surrey’s largest social housing landlords being downgraded by regulators for failing its tenants.

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) found that issues at A2Dominion had “crystalised over a breadth of areas” which “resulted in poor outcomes for its tenants”.

The report, published on Wednesday January 3 said A2Dominion had been working to make improvements but had not yet been able to deliver the changes required. This led to poor quality data, poor reporting, and the board not having effective oversight.

Harold Brown, senior assistant director for investigations and enforcement at RSH, said: “We found significant issues with A2Dominion’s data and its business planning, risk and control framework, leading to a failure by the provider to manage key risks effectively. A2Dominion is working with us to address these issues and we will continue to monitor the provider as it works to return to compliance.”

The group owns and manages more than 38,000 homes across 79 local authority areas in London, the South East and Wiltshire. The majority of its housing stock is for general needs. It also has significant levels of shared ownership housing as well as supported or sheltered accommodation. A2Dominion, as a charitable housing association, must meet certain regulatory standards over how it is run.

Its new board took over in September 2022 and referred itself to RSH following concerns over the quality of some services, as well as its financial position. A2Dominion was then under review for three months while it was investigated for potential non-compliance.

In a letter to stakeholders, CEO Ian Wardle said: “We know that outcomes for some customers have been poor. Earlier this year, we issued an apology to customers who had been adversely affected. While we have made some improvements, work is still underway to fully resolve issues with repairs, service charges, complaints, damp and mould, latent defects and the roles and responsibilities with managing agents. We also know that our services aren’t as responsive as they could be. In some of these areas, we aren’t always delivering the high standards we set ourselves and customers expect.”

The regulator downgraded A2Dominion from G1, which means a provider meets governance requirements, to G3 where there are issues of serious regulatory concern which the provider is working to improve. It’s financial position is unchanged. The new grading does not affect services and it will continue to deliver its day-to-day operations as normal.

Mr Wardle said: “Over the past few months, we’ve been in positive and constructive discussions with the regulator following our self-referrals. We’ve welcomed the opportunity to identify further steps that we can take to make improvements for our customers and the communities we serve. “The regulator has confirmed that it has assurance that we have an adequately funded business plan in the short term, sufficient security in place, and is forecast to continue to meet its financial covenants.

“Since I joined in September 2022, we’ve had a new chair of the board appointed, many new board members, and changes to our management team. All our colleagues are passionate about what we do. However, in far too many instances, colleagues haven’t had the resources and processes to fully deliver outstanding customer service. It is my job to fix this, and we’ve made improvements throughout 2023, with more planned in 2024.

“At the same time historic decisions on development schemes, tougher trading conditions and rising costs have affected our finances, but we will weather the storm. We’ve already made a number of significant improvements in relation to customer complaints and have prioritised our commitment to social housing as the core of our business, including our exit from care services and fine tuning our development strategy so we can focus on getting things right first time for our customers. We also remain financially strong, with an A credit rating from Fitch, £3.6 billion of assets, and over £300 million of undrawn available facilities.

“I look forward to continuing to work closely with the regulator following their decision, and will collaborate on the steps we need to take to return to our previous rating.”

Image: A2dominion Home