

Poorest will pay for a Council's mismanagement

24 November 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

24 November 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 Thameswey 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

24 November 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

24 November 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?

24 November 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 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

24 November 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

24 November 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

24 November 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

24 November 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

24 November 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.”