

Surrey SEND parents owed money

24 April 2025



Parents of children with special educational needs who were left with little choice but to use private educational psychologists may be due money back from Surrey County Council.

So far 27 families have been reimbursed for having to go private between the 2023 summer term and May 2024 due to a lack of qualified professionals able to create educational care plans.

This has resulted in £26,475 being returned to families - although it has not been a straightforward process for some parents.

The figures emerged following a recently published complaint against Surrey County Council.

The local government and social care ombudsman upheld that the authority refused to reimburse a mother who used a private educational psychologist in support of her son's education health and care (EHC) needs assessment.

The ombudsman also upheld the council delayed making payments for her son's tutor and that its communications were poor.

The ombudsman upheld further complaints about delays at Surrey County Council in completing needs assessments due to the national shortage of educational psychologists - but that it has since been satisfied with the steps being taken to resolve the issue.

Between the 2023 summer term and May 2024 Surrey County Council said it temporarily agreed to reimburse private reports due to its backlog.

The ombudsman said: "If we were to investigate this complaint it is likely that we would find fault.

"This is because the council accepted that a report from an educational psychologist was required and used the one obtained by Miss X.

"Therefore, it should have reimbursed her for the full costs. Also, when responding to Miss X's complaint, the council accepted there were delays making payments to (the child's) tutors.

"Whilst the council did apologise, this is likely to have caused Miss X distress in the form of uncertainty that wasn't remedied.

"I therefore asked the council to write to Miss X within one month to apologise and to make a payment to her for the full cost of the educational psychologist assessment she obtained and to offer a payment of £100 to remedy the distress its delayed payments to tutors caused her.

"To its credit, the council agreed."

Councillor Clare Curran, cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning, said she was not able to comment on any individual children specifically, but the council accepted the findings from the ombudsman report and apologised to the family affected for any distress caused.

A spokesperson for the council added: "Where we used the private EP report as the sole advice during that time at the parent/carer's request we would cover the cost.

"However, if we did not use it as the sole advice then we would not reimburse."

They added that authority was now operating at over 90 per cent "timeliness" and able to meet demand.

Image: New Surrey County Council HQ, Woodhatch Place on Cockshot Hill, Reigate. Credit Surrey County Council

Surrey Police know where they're going with more of them

24 April 2025



Surrey Police will have ‘the highest number of officers in a generation’ after locking up money for 40 more patrol cops. The estimated £2.5million in central government money is part of a Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee and will add to the 222 extra officers who joined the force since March 2021 - and its March 2025 total of 2,336 officers. The new recruits will likely comprise 25 full time police officers and 15 special constables.

The programme is part of the government’s plan to have at least one named, contactable, officer in each neighbourhood, as well as dedicated teams on patrol in town centres and other hotspots. There will also be dedicated antisocial behaviour leads in every force which Surrey Police said reflects the government’s recognition of the public’s crime and safety concerns.

Surrey Police Chief Constable, Tim De Meyer, said: “For us, the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee is a chance to strengthen our presence in the heart of our communities, with officers working alongside residents, identify local issues, and resolve problems before they escalate. It’s about building lasting relationships and ensuring that we are seen as a trusted resource, not just an authority figure. The guarantee reinforces our commitment to community engagement, crime prevention, and proactive policing. With this initiative, we will be better equipped to build stronger relationships, deliver more targeted interventions through our hotspot policing efforts, and improve overall safety for the communities we serve. The promise of increased officer numbers will enable us to further tackle issues such as anti-social behaviour, theft, and drug-related crimes. While the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee presents several advantages, it also comes with challenges that we must address to ensure its success. The demand for resources across the Force must be managed effectively to ensure that neighbourhood policing remains a priority, even in times of high demand. Additionally, engaging with communities that have historically had strained relationships with the police can take time and require a sensitive, consistent and tailored approach. However, these challenges present an opportunity for us to demonstrate our commitment to transparency, community-focused policing, and problem-solving.”

Assistant Chief Constable, Tanya Jones, added: “By staying true to the Force principles, and embracing the goals of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, we can strengthen our role as a trusted, proactive Force that works alongside local communities to tackle crime, improve public safety, and build a sense of community pride. As officers and staff, we must embrace opportunities to speak with local residents, build trust, and work collaboratively to prevent crime. We can create environments where residents feel heard, supported, and secure. It’s more than just policing, it’s about shaping communities in a way that promotes safety, confidence, and lasting social cohesion.”

Surrey’s Police and Crime Commissioner, Lisa Townsend welcomed the additional funding. She said: “Based on the funding allocation provided, it is projected that Surrey Police will benefit from an additional 25 police officers, as well as 15 Special Constables.” Adding: “Neighbourhood policing is a key commitment for Surrey Police, and residents are already benefiting from that focus, with an additional 3,500 charges and 2,500 more arrests across all crime types in 12 months. Initiatives such as the Safer Streets programme and hotspot policing have led to increased trust and greater intelligence gathering in our communities. However, forces across the country are also seeing a rise in ‘hidden’ crime types, such as fraud, domestic abuse and sextortion, and Surrey is no exception. These crimes have very real victims, and we must ensure those victims are getting support from specially-trained officers dedicated to pursuing justice for them. As part of the doctrine of operational independence, Surrey’s Chief Constable Tim De Meyer decides where his officers and staff are best-deployed to tackle offending. Under his leadership, the Force is one of the fastest-improving in the country. Both Tim and I are determined to ensure this brilliant progress is sustained.”

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Pedestrian visions of Mole Valley

24 April 2025



Masterplans for Dorking and Bookham are set to be signed off by Mole Valley District Council’s executive committee on

April 16. These set out a bank of projects the council would like to “bring to life” in order to make “a lasting positive impact” on the towns. Among the works being considered are improvements to Dorking town centre, as well as connections to the three train stations. The council said it wants to improve streets and public spaces, get more people walking and cycling, and find uses for its vacant buildings.

For Dorking, the council wants to create a greater sense of arrival, improve its cultural offering, and address crash hotspots. A new “more attractive” civic hub would create an “important cluster” of cultural, leisure and civic buildings to encourage more people to spend time there - while pedestrianising access to Dorking Halls could help maximise the experience around the famous site. As a whole, the masterplan focuses on the town centre, public spaces, transport infrastructure, and HGV restrictions to protect the heritage character of the town.

The option to pedestrianise West Street was not taken forward in Dorking, but the idea of cutting cars from High Street in Bookham has been retained. The council is also looking to capture more of the visitors to Polesden Lacy and Box Hill into the historic core of Bookham village by reducing the impact of traffic and its “car dominated environment” and celebrating the town’s heritage and cultural links.

At this stage though, all options are concepts and not fully realised designs or planned projects. The intention, the draft masterplan reads, is to “plant seeds of ideas for change; as such they will need to be further developed subsequent to completion of this study.”

In a statement issued ahead of the meeting, Councillor Margaret Cooksey, cabinet member for community services, said she was pleased the masterplans had reached the approval stage and that the majority of feedback had been in support of the project. She said: “We listened to our communities and made necessary and appropriate changes based on the feedback received, before presenting the final plans to cabinet.

“Once the masterplans are approved, the commencement of these projects will depend on securing the necessary funding. Mole Valley District Council will explore various funding streams, including government grants, national organisations, and local contributions. We are committed to bringing these projects to life and making a lasting positive impact on Bookham and Dorking. Many of the schemes will require further discussions about their details in the future.”

The council said that more than 500 people engaged in the Bookham masterplan consultation and that there were more than 1,000 responses for Dorking.

Thames Water hopes £37m investment will end record sewer flooding

24 April 2025



Thames Water has said it will spend £37m upgrading its Mole Valley network raising hopes it could spell the end of homes, gardens and rivers being flooded with sewage waste.

The private utility company came in for heavy criticism for the “damage it has inflicted” despite huge profits and shareholder payouts while its pipe network falls into disrepair during the latest scrutiny committee meeting at Mole Valley District Council.

However, it hopes investment projects in Dorking, Earslwood, and Horley will increase its ability to manage storm flows, treat more waste water, and prevent “effluent” flooding rivers and waterways.

The investment was welcomed as a step in the right direction but many at the meeting aired their disappointment with the firm for letting the situation get this bad.

Last year, Thames Water spent 13,101 hours pumping sewage into the River Mole and its tributaries according to new government data seen by the MP - an increase of 10.9 per cent despite there being less rain.

Speaking after the meeting, the Dorking and Horley MP, Chris Coghlan, described the record as “simply unacceptable” but has since had assurances from Thames Water and environmental regulators that “long overdue” upgrades were on the way

He said: “For years, the entire water industry has been poorly managed and woefully under-regulated.

“To expect hard-pressed customers to now pick up the tab for 35 years of under-investment by Thames Water, while the company continues to flood my constituents’ homes and gardens with disgusting sewage is shocking.

“The Government and Ofwat have a duty to hold the water companies to account”, he said, adding that the regulator needed to be replaced with a body that would “will make Thames water pay up for the damage it has inflicted.”

In Dorking, Thames Water is putting £16m into new storm tanks to treat incoming sewage and reduce dumping of untreated waste.

At its Earlswood site, just outside Mole Valley, it will increase treatment volumes from 340 to 440 litres per second, helping to prevent effluent going into the river - and what does will be of a higher quality.

Horley will benefit from upgrades to improve performance in wet weather.

Councillor Stephen Cooksey, leader of Mole Valley District Council told the meeting: “The question that flows through my mind is, although you can’t answer it tonight, is how as a responsible company you’ve allowed your infrastructure to get into such a dreadful condition?”

Thames Water’s Alice Keeping described the £37m as “a substantial amount of money that we are going to invest going forward”.

A Thames Water spokesperson said: “In 2024 parts of our region experienced some of the wettest months in 250 years. This overwhelmed our sewer network which resulted in diluted wastewater being released into rivers. While all storm discharges are unacceptable, the sewage systems were designed in this way to prevent sewage backing up into people’s homes.

“Over the next five years we will deliver a record amount of investment across our network.

“We continue to execute our plans to upgrade over 250 of our storm overflows to reduce the number of storm discharges including at our sites in Crawley and Horley.

Esher Mill Road overflow sewage site (image Chris Caulfield)

Woking Council private school loan scandal

24 April 2025



A private school loaned millions of pounds at favourable rates by bankrupt Woking Borough Council has still to pay its overdue debts - with the local authority saying it is “taking appropriate legal advice” to get its money back. Greenfield School in Old Woking was lent £13.3 million by the now-bust borough, with the previous administration saying the money would help free up capacity within state schools.

Last year, £2.4 million of that was due to be paid back, but the school said it was short of cash and instead offered the council a town centre building it owned in exchange, worth considerably less than that. The council, which is in the process of offloading assets to pay off its own multibillion-pound debt, told the school in November last year that it did not have the capacity to take on any additional buildings.

Four months on, the two parties appear to remain apart on terms, with questions now being asked at Woking Borough Council’s March 20 executive meeting over whether the school will be able to “regularise” its position. Councillor Dale Roberts, lead member for finance, said: “We made it clear that the strong preference of this council was that the school simply met their existing commitments. They are also aware that they are required to provide independent and professional advice on the viability of their plans to repay. Our needs must be front and centre to provide assurance that the school will be able to honour any revised terms and of course that means not just the repayment in November last year but for the whole of the arrangement.”

Cllr Roberts described the loans as “inappropriate” and that the “former administration had no business entering into any such arrangement”. He said: “I’d prefer not to comment on the legalities but I can say with some confidence that it was ultra reckless. The (previous administration) may or may not have acted beyond their legal powers but they certainly sprinted with blind ambition past the boundaries of good judgement.”

According to the papers published by Woking Borough Council, the unsecured loans between 2019 and 2021 helped the school to relocate into another catchment area and enter a different segment of the private education market. Woking Borough Council declared itself effectively bankrupt in 2023 and had to cut services while increasing tax by 10 per cent to help cover its financial meltdown. Greenfield School, which charges up to £17,010 a year, has previously told the council it “may not be in a position” to repay money owed.

Related reports:

No wonder Woking went bankrupt. Scandal of private school loans

Image: Greenfield School Woking (image Google)

Will sale of Dorking offices compromise housing plans?

24 April 2025



Dorking's former Aviva building has been put up for sale. The offices in Pixham Lane are being marketed by Savills - with the asking price only available on application. Currently owned by Stonegate Homes, it was set to play a key role in Mole Valley District Council's housing targets, having sat empty for years following the decision of insurance company Aviva to leave the Pixham Lane site in the town at the end of 2016. Failure to meet its targets can have a lasting impact and leave boroughs open to unwanted development.

Owners Stonegate Homes were contacted but did not respond, and calls have been going straight to answer machine. Planning permission was granted for the site - often referred to as the former Aviva Building - for 369 homes in a mixture of flats and townhouses. Savills describes the land as "a substantial former office building". Built in 1957, it was eventually bought by Dorking-based developers Stonegate with a view to converting it into homes, but its future is now shrouded with uncertainty.

Savill's marketing brochure reads: "The site is considered to be an excellent opportunity to acquire one of the most prominent development sites in Dorking to deliver a mix of flats and houses that are in close proximity to Dorking Station. The location enjoys views of the Surrey Hills and is within close proximity of open countryside. The site has potential for some additional planning gain for further additional houses to be delivered, subject to planning and any technical constraints. There is the option to acquire the whole or to purchase phases with offers invited on an unconditional and subject to planning basis."

Senior Mole Valley District councillors have said they are keeping a close eye on the sale and how it will affect housing delivery. Councillor Margaret Cooksey, portfolio holder for planning, said: "We need the homes to be built; they were supposed to be affordable homes on the site plus other community facilities. We need those to happen. We will be watching closely."

Image: Former Aviva site in Pixham Lane, near Dorking (image Google)

Expanding London airports "not an environmental trade off" - Minister claims

24 April 2025



Expanding Heathrow and Gatwick is "crucial" for this government after years of people sticking "their heads in the sand" over plans for new runways at south east airports, the Secretary of State for Transport said.

Heidi Alexander made the remarks as she outlined its vision to "modernise" the aviation sector at the annual AirportsUK dinner at a time when passenger levels at the country's airports had grown by 7 per cent - and signs indicating 2025 would be a record breaking year.

She said: "It's clear this is a trend, not an unusual year. In fact, everything points to a record-breaking 2025 - and it's

easy to see why.

“The world has never been more interconnected. The desire for travel never stronger. Global forecasts show a near doubling of passengers and cargo in the next 20 years. So the demand is there. It’s growing. And if we don’t seize it, we not only risk being outpaced by European competitors, but we will be on the wrong side of public aspirations.”

The Government has already announced its support for a third runway at Heathrow Airport - which has put in £2.3billion to overhaul its infrastructure - and more recently said it was ‘minded to approve’ a second at Gatwick.

She added: “We see airports as a crucial pillar of our plan for change. And it’s why we’ve acted, and acted quickly, across three areas - starting with expansion. It’s no secret that long ignored capacity issues in the south-east, has meant some of our major airports are now bursting at the seams.

“And yet - when it came to expansion - too many people stuck their heads in the sand. It left the industry in a perpetual holding pattern, with decisions circling around Whitehall for years, waiting for a clear signal.”

Expansion at Heathrow would be the first new full-length runway in the country for quarter of a century with the transport secretary saying her job was now to balance “economic benefits of expansion with social and environmental commitments.”

She said this was reflected in her caveated support for Gatwick - with a “clear path for expansion” set out if certain conditions are met.

A final decision on whether to approve Gatwick’s expansion is expected to be made on October 27.

The transport secretary finished: “I will never accept the false trade off that pits growing aviation against protecting our environment. I honestly believe we can, and must, do both. And how we do that is already being answered...

“Firstly, we cannot hope for quieter, cleaner and greener flights if our most critical piece of infrastructure is stuck in the past. We must ramp up work on reducing emissions. Green flight isn’t only essential for the industry, it’s existential.”

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Heathrow expansion reaction

Heathrow Airport. Credit Heathrow Airports Limited.

Drowning in Debt: Epsom MP Demands Thames Water Takeover

24 April 2025



Thames Water should be put into “special administration” rather than given a £3billion bailout, Epsom and Ewell’s MP said after the utility company won a major court battle to stave off nationalisation.

In February, the embattled water firm won the right to go ahead with the huge loan despite some of Thames Water’s creditors opposing the costly 9.75 per cent interest rate. The decision was then challenged on appeal with the courts this week again finding in favour of Thames Water.

The company, which has overseen record sewage spills amid rising prices for customers - while paying out hundreds of millions of pounds in dividends to shareholders - says the £3billion loan puts them on a “more stable financial foundation”. From April, bills will increase by 31 per cent.

Thames Water CEO Chris Weston said they were pleased with the court’s decision “decisively refused” the appeal and allowed the loan to go through. He said: “We remain focused on putting Thames Water onto a more stable financial foundation as we seek a long-term solution to our financial resilience.

“Today’s news demonstrates further progress. We continue to work closely with our creditors, enabling us to access liquidity to continue to implement our turnaround plan so we can deliver better results for our customers and the environment while seeking to attract new capital into the business.

“As we have previously stated, the Company Plan will not affect customer bills but will provide continued investment in our network to fix pipes, upgrade our sewage treatment works, and maintain high-quality drinking water. We remain of the view that a market led solution is in the best interest of customers, UK taxpayers and the wider economy.”

The decision to reject Charlie Maynard, the Liberal Democrat MP for Whitney’s appeal has not pleased everyone.

Helen Maguire, the Lib Dem MP for Epsom and Ewell, described the bail out as “terrible news” for people “who have been paying the price for a company that is not fit for purpose.”

She said: “Thames Water is spending almost a third of my constituents’ bills on servicing their mountain of debt, instead of investing in vital infrastructure and stopping gallons of sewage from being pumped into our rivers.

“It is in the Government’s power to end this now. Thames Water must be put into special administration and we cannot allow failing water bosses to keep throwing good money after bad, while our regulators sit on their hands and customers’ bills go through the roof.”

Thames Water’s cash flow was set to run dry in March before the loan deal was agreed with speculation growing that it could come under government control. The network is also in need of major repair and modernisation expected to cost in the billions.

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[Surrey’s LibDem MP majority take on Thames Water](#)

[Thames Water’s reputation going down the drain](#)

[Thames Water rebate](#)

[Epsom & Ewell households drowning as water bills rise?](#)

Image credit: By NegativeSpace in Travel (logo added).

Parliament motion to reinstate Surrey County May elections

24 April 2025



Surrey elections could still go ahead if a “fatal motion” (*see below) to overturn the decision to cancel the May 2025 ballot wins out. This year’s local elections were postponed until at least May 2026 after the Government passed legislation to delay the vote in order to allow councils to focus on devolution.

Its argument, backed by Surrey County Council, was that it would free officer time to focus on merging the lower layers of government while being overseen by more experienced politicians. It would also save millions of pounds as any newly created councils would need to hold their own polls soon after. Opponents to the delay argue that cancelling elections robs people of their right to vote and that elected officials only have authority by virtue of being backed by residents - and nobody voted for them to be in power this long.

Leader of the Conservative Party Kemi Badenoch had previously tried to stop the order passing in February, and now the fight has been picked up in the House of Lords with a debate set for March 24 to annul the government’s decision to cancel the election. Devolution would result in Surrey and its 11 boroughs and districts merging into either two or three mega councils overseen by a single mayor.

Two fatal motions put by Green Party Baroness Jenny Jones and the Liberal Democrats’ Baroness Pinnock will be debated, along with a Conservative Regret Motion. It calls on the order to be annulled as it “denies timely democratic representation to a substantial portion of the electorate; undermines local democratic accountability; disrupts established electoral cycles; lacks sufficient consultation; and erodes the democratic mandate for major restructuring of local government.”

Baroness Jones said: “I believe that a majority of peers are against the Government cancelling elections in May.” She added: “The government can’t guarantee that some areas won’t have a second year of cancelled elections as they try to impose mayors that will spend more time talking to ministers than local people. There has been no attempt to gather consensus within two-tier areas or to consult local residents about what they want. The government know that the elections in May would become a referendum of their plans to sideline local communities, and they might not like the answer that voters give.”

*Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

The phrase “**fatal motion**” is a specific parliamentary term used in the UK House of Lords. It refers to a type of motion that, if passed, effectively **annuls** or **blocks** a statutory instrument (a form of secondary legislation made by the government).

In this context, the “fatal motion” being debated on **March 24** aims to **overturn the government’s decision to cancel the May 2025 local elections**. If the motion succeeds, the original order delaying the elections would be nullified, and the elections could go ahead as planned.

This type of motion is distinct from a “**regret motion**,” which allows the Lords to express disapproval of a government decision but does not actually stop it from taking effect. The **fatal motion, on the other hand, has binding consequences** if passed.

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Surrey ratches up record fines for education failures

24 April 2025



Surrey County Council is on pace to be hit with more than £1 million in fines and redress payments due to its repeated failures within its education service over the last two years. The council says the system doesn’t work for families, schools, or local authorities – and has lobbied the government for changes, additional funding, and urgent reform.

The “record-breaking” fines, which have climbed from £47,000 in 2020 to more than half a million pounds last year and almost double its previous high of £258,730 in 2023, show the council has “lost control and continues to put vulnerable people at risk,” according to opposition leaders. Now, Surrey County Council has paid £239,510.75 in financial remedies in the first six months of this financial year – putting it on track to hit £470,000 for the full 12 months and a million pounds in the past two years. The majority, £220,965.00, relates to its education services, with the largest individual payments arising from complaints about missed education or missed provision, reports show. These are made when a child is unable to attend school because appropriate or alternative support has not been provided, or where the provision agreed in an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) has not been put in place.

The three largest individual remedies paid out so far this year are about £11,000, £8,900, and £8,353 – primarily in recognition of time missed. The largest fine or payment in its Children’s Social Care services so far is £8,325.12, in relation to “errors.”

Clare Curran, Surrey County Council cabinet member for children, families, and lifelong learning, said: “We are working hard to reduce spend on fines, which we know is higher than it should be. Provision and support for children with SEND is a systemic issue that councils up and down the country are grappling with. The national system is not working for families, schools, or councils, and we and other bodies are consistently lobbying the government for wider system changes, additional funding, and urgent reform.”

She said the council had also been working to improve the service with £15m put into a “three-year multi-agency recovery plan” in 2023, which was “now showing clear performance improvements.” Cllr Curran added: “The volume of stage one complaints received in the first six months of this year has decreased compared to the same period in the last two financial years, reflecting the efforts made by services across the council to resolve complaints early on and in the timeliness of responses. We also recognise that delays in issuing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) have historically contributed to missed provision and subsequent fines, however progress is being made in this area too.

“Our average EHCP timeliness levels in Surrey over the six months from September 2024 – February 2025 is 72 per cent, well over the national average of 50.3 per cent. We have also caught up on the backlog of Education, Health and Care needs assessments, and over 75 per cent of overdue annual reviews have now been brought up to date. We expect these

improvements to start having an impact on the number of Local Government Ombudsman cases in the near future.

“We are resolute in our ambition to continue to improve 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.”

Councillor Paul Follows, Liberal Democrat group leader at Surrey County Council, said the authority had been promising to fix children’s services for years but has had little to show for it so far. He added: “Surrey County Council have for years been promising families that they would get a grip of children’s services and SEND provision, and as these record-breaking fines indicate, they have lost control and continue to put vulnerable people at risk.”

New Surrey County Council HQ, Woodhatch Place on Cockshot Hill, Reigate. Credit Surrey County Council

Who will be saddled with Spelthorne’s and Woking’s £3 billion debts?

24 April 2025



The Surrey Borough of Spelthorne’s financial crisis is “even more critical”, with millions in cuts needed to avoid catastrophic bankruptcy, says new report.

Best value inspectors were called in to review the council’s finances in May 2024 in light of extremely high levels of debt and borrowing. Spelthorne’s debt reached £1.096 billion in March 2023 – the second highest level of debt for a district council in England at the time.

The findings of the inspection have been published today (March 17). The report highlights that the council “is in a critical financial position, burdened by unsustainable debt levels, significant investment risks, and systemic governance weaknesses”.

Between 2016 and 2018, Spelthorne Borough Council borrowed around £1 billion to invest in a commercial portfolio of Grade A office buildings and residential land in and around the borough. But slow progress on regeneration and housing projects highlights a limited understanding of regeneration delivery as well as finance and risk, the inspectors said.

Best Value Inspectors concluded: “The council’s use of its resources is inadequate”. In the damning report, they said Spelthorne’s approach to property acquisitions “lacked due regard to long-term planning and risk management” and had an “overly-optimistic reliance on consistency” of the market that the Council first entered.

The report said: “The combination of voids, expiring leases, and falling income streams from the investment portfolio threatens the stability of its budget. Adding to the strain are the ongoing revenue costs of housing and regeneration projects, which were suspended in late 2023. Despite these mounting financial pressures, no clear path forward has been outlined to address them.”

The recovery process will be overseen by government-appointed commissioners. Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon, wrote to leader Cllr Joanne Sexton to say the local authority is failing in its ‘best value’ duty to residents, essentially meaning the authority is defecting on its ability to make decisions that are economic, efficient and effective and work towards continuous improvement.

Inspectors said the council has a “poor record” of fully and effectively implementing recommendations from external reviews. The report read: “Senior officers display an optimism bias and a lack of awareness of the true situation facing the council. We do not believe the council has the capacity and capability to make the urgent changes needed without significant external support.”

Both the inspection and the recent external audit found errors in the council’s financial practices including the miscalculating the minimum amount Spelthorne needs to keep paying back its debt, incorrectly classifying expenses as assets, further undermining the revenue budget.

“The outline budget report for 2025/26 to 2028/29 presented to members on December 9, 2024 shows the need to deliver £8.6 million in savings by 2028/29, equating to 64 per cent of the council’s core spending power for 2024/25, or 33 per cent of the net budget, assuming contributions from commercial income. In our view, even these projections are understated. Despite this, we have seen no credible strategy in place to achieve savings of this level,” said the report.

Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Cllr Joanne Sexton, said, “This Group Administration has faced a challenging time and has been actively pursuing the right solution to manage the historical debt that it has inherited. We have met with the Local Government Minister from central government, and we have agreed to work in partnership to take decisive action

in the remaining time we have before local government reorganisation is implemented. Our pledge remains that we will always put residents at the heart of everything we do.”

The council’s senior management team also came in for criticism in the report. Inspectors said the team seemed “overly confident” and “appear to underestimate the scale of the financial risks”. Member challenges remain “limited” according to the report, with many councillors not fully understanding the risks at hand. Inspectors highlighted there was a “wider breakdown” of relationships between senior management and the political leadership.

The findings of the inspection highlight the council is failing to meet best value standards in five critical areas:

- Use of Resources;
- Continuous Improvement;
- Governance;
- Leadership;
- Culture.

Inspectors have published thirteen recommendations for Spelthorne:

1. Commissioner-led intervention
2. Comprehensive commercial strategy
3. Review and strengthen asset management
4. Review of the Council’s Minimum Revenue Provision
5. Revised Medium-Term Financial strategy
6. Debt reduction strategy
7. Transformation strategy development
8. Review and strengthen finance function
9. Improvement and recovery plan
10. Revised Corporate Plan
11. Audit Committee structure
12. Culture and relationship building
13. Housing delivery

Emily Dalton

Spelthorne Borough Council offices in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

Chris Caulfield compares Woking and Spelthorne:

The “critical” state of Spelthorne Borough Council’s finances means it must cut at least £8.6 million from its budget by 2028. To put that into perspective, bankrupt Woking Borough Council made £8.4 million in cuts last year in an effort to right its own mess. It managed it by cutting 20 per cent of its workforce, scrapping all grant funding to community groups, and shutting services such as public toilets.

Spelthorne Borough Council’s finances are “unsustainable”, with a £1 billion pound debt and a falling income stream. It means the authority must also cut millions in services to avoid the catastrophe of bankruptcy. The damning critique of the north Surrey council’s situation was published today, Monday, March 17, on the back of a best value review into the way the borough has been managed.

Spelthorne Borough Council, like Woking, borrowed heavily to invest in property and used the income to pay for services above and beyond what it could have otherwise afforded. And, again like Woking, it failed to put enough money aside to cover the cost of debt interest repayments.

“In essence, the council’s revenue budget is under far greater pressure than recognised by the council. Inherent risks are beginning to materialise, and could accelerate rapidly”, the Spelthorne Borough Council: Best Value Inspection report read.

It comes as the government confirmed it was proposing an intervention package, including appointing commissioners to oversee changes in how Spelthorne Borough Council is run because the borough lacks experience needed to make the cuts and had “no credible strategy in place to achieve savings of this level.”

Spelthorne has to shed £8.6 million from 2028/29 budget. Last year Woking Borough Council – the only local authority with a higher per capita debt than Spelthorne – achieved £8.4 million in savings.

This is how residents and community groups in Woking were affected. It is being used to paint a picture of what cuts at that scale look and feel like

How Woking achieved its savings.

- Centres for the community and day care facilities closed and merged
- Sports pavilions transferred to sports clubs to take over and “ensure as many of these facilities can remain open”.
- Grants to voluntary and community groups stopped
- Woking Community Transport reduced but reviewed annually as part of the council’s Medium-Term Financial Strategy.
- Grounds maintenance and street cleaning services scaled back to statutory levels.
- Independent living and family services transferred to Surrey County Council or other boroughs, which means they will continue to operate as normal with no impact to services users.
- Business liaison and support services will be scaled back
- All public toilets closed, except those located in Victoria Place and Wolsey Walk in Woking Town Centre.
- Fees and charges increased
- Loss of up to 60 council staff
- Council tax was also increased that year by 10 per cent. Since then it has risen by a further 2.99 per cent.

Related reports:

Who will be saddled with Spelthorne’s and Woking’s £3 billion debts?

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Woking’s whopping bail out and tax rise

Epsom & Ewell ranks in the middle of Surrey Councils’ tax charges

24 April 2025



Residents will face another jump in council tax bills from April 1 as local authorities have announced their budgets for the coming year. Surrey County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner, and each of the county’s 11 districts and boroughs, confirmed their increases separately last month, with council tax bills and collection being the responsibility of the districts and boroughs.

Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend confirmed a rise of £14 per year for residents amid an increase in national insurance contributions and officer pay rises. While Surrey County Council, responsible for adult social care as well as services including road repairs and schools, increased its tax by 4.99 per cent on Band D homes.

Meanwhile, many local authorities have had to make tough decisions to balance the books. Councils slammed the government for giving an ‘unkind’ or ‘difficult’ financial settlement, meaning they have had no increase in spending power. Inflation, wage rises and rocketing costs for employer’s national insurance contributions have all pulled at the seams of councils’ pockets.



| | Borough Council | Band D |
|----|----------------------|------------|
| 1 | Woking | £ 2,482.03 |
| 2 | Reigate and Banstead | £ 2,448.79 |
| 3 | Elmbridge | £ 2,442.06 |
| 4 | Surrey Heath | £ 2,439.20 |
| 5 | Tandridge | £ 2,436.24 |
| 6 | Epsom and Ewell | £ 2,416.84 |
| 7 | Spelthorne | £ 2,412.78 |
| 8 | Waverley | £ 2,397.78 |
| 9 | Guildford | £ 2,388.01 |
| 10 | Mole Valley | £ 2,381.20 |
| 11 | Runnymede | £ 2,380.06 |

Table created by Epsom and Ewell Times

Where the thousands of new homes will be built in Surrey’s smallest borough - Epsom and Ewell

24 April 2025



“Critical” details on nearly 5,000 homes across 35 sites in Epsom and Ewell have been laid out after the borough council submitted its planning masterplan.

The local plan will shape the future of the borough’s jobs, environmental protections, and leisure development - as well as allocating land for new homes and much-needed infrastructure improvements, the council said.

The single largest development will be in Horton Farm, between Horton Lane and Hook Road, where more than 1,250 homes are earmarked to be built alongside business spaces, a community building and park.

The plan will go before public examination by an independent inspector later this year for sign off.

Councillor Peter O’Donovan, chair of the licensing and planning policy committee, at Epsom and Ewell Council said “I am very grateful to officers who have worked diligently to reach this milestone, ensuring that the local plan is assessed against the framework to which it was developed.

“Overall, it has been a huge undertaking.”

The council has been set housing targets of about 4,700 homes with the local plan identifying a supply of 4,914.

He added: “I know that the plan will not please everyone.

“However, I believe it is a huge step forward for our borough and our communities, and if adopted it will help ensure that all Epsom and Ewell residents can enjoy the benefits that this strategic plan aims to deliver - whether their focus is on access to affordable homes, leisure facilities and green space, to jobs and economic growth.”

Included in the target are 456 homes that have already been built. Green belt land will be used to provide 1,580 homes.

The council says its planning bible will create “new vibrant communities” centred on currently underdeveloped transport hubs or development of larger sites.

It hopes these new developments will “form new communities and grow to be distinct places with their own identities.”

To support this, they will need to be “supported by appropriate investments in community and transport infrastructure to ensure existing and new residents are supported in terms of movement, health, education and other services.”

Epsom town centre will also be redeveloped to create improved retail space.

“It is important that the town centre continues to diversify and attract uses other than retail to the town centre to reflect the social and economic changes that have affected demand for retail and office space and investment.

“Developing the night-time economy is a key opportunity, with recent investment in a new cinema and the Playhouse Theatre”, the submitted plan read.

So far 35 sites have been allocated for redevelopment. Some, such as the 455 homes and a bespoke performing arts centre for the Laine Theatre Arts at the Southern Gas Network Site have already begun working through the planning system.

The 35 site allocations the council hopes will deliver a significant proportion of the Local Plan’s housing requirement.

- Southern Gas Network Site Allocated for: Approximately 455 dwellings and a bespoke performing arts centre for the Laine Theatre Arts
- Hook Road Car Park Allocated for: Approximately 150 dwellings
- Solis House, 20 Hook Road Allocated for: Approximately 20 dwellings
- Bunzl, Hook Road Allocated for: Approximately 20 dwellings
- Epsom Town Hall Allocated for: Approximately 90 dwellings
- Hope Lodge Car Park Allocated for: Approximately 30 dwellings
- Former Police and Ambulance Station Sites Allocated for: Erection of a new 85 bedroom residential, nursing and dementia care home for the frail elderly
- Epsom Clinic Allocated for: Approximately 30 dwellings
- Depot Road and Upper High Street Car Park Allocated for: Approximately 100 dwellings and a decked public car park
- 79-85 East Street Allocated for: Approximately 35 dwellings
- Finachem House, 2 - 4 Ashley Road Allocated for: Approximately 20 dwellings
- Global House Allocated for: Approximately 75 dwellings
- Swail House Allocated for: Refurbishment of Swail House for residential use and the provision of replacement purpose-built specialist accommodation for the RNIB consisting of approximately 45 dwellings (net) located to the rear of Swail House
- 60 East Street Allocated for: Approximately 30 dwellings
- Corner of Kiln Lane and East Street (101b East Street) Allocated for: Approximately 5 dwellings
- Land at Kiln Lane Allocated for: Approximately 40 dwellings
- Hatch Furlong Nursery Allocated for: Approximately 30 dwellings
- Land to the Rear of Rowe Hall Allocated for: Extra Care Accommodation comprising 96 self-contained apartments, staff and communal facilities
- 7 Station Approach Allocated for: Approximately 5 dwellings
- Esso Express, 26 Reigate Road Allocated for: Approximately 10 dwellings
- Richards Field Car Park Allocated for: Approximately 7 dwellings
- Etwelle House, Station Road Allocated for: Approximately 20 dwellings
- 140-142 Ruxley Lane Allocated for: Approximately 12 dwellings
- Garages at Somerset Close & Westmorland Close Allocated for: Approximately 6 dwellings
- 64 South Street Epsom Allocated for: Approximately 6 dwellings
- 35 Alexandra Road Allocated for: Approximately 8 dwellings
- 22-24 Dorking Road Allocated for: Approximately 18 dwellings
- 63 Dorking Road Allocated for: Specialist Care Home with ancillary nurses accommodation (equivalent to 6 dwellings)
- 65 London Road Allocated for: Care home up to 81 bedrooms
- Epsom General Hospital Allocated for: Approximately 305 units older people’s accommodation (Use Class C2), 24 key worker dwellings and a children’s nursery
- Land at West Park Hospital (South) Allocated for: Approximately 50 dwellings

- Land at West Park Hospital (North) Allocated for: Approximately 150 dwellings
- Land at Chantilly Way Allocated for: Approximately 30 dwellings
- Hook Road Arena Allocated for: New Sports Hub for the borough to include playing pitches (grass and artificial), a new pavilion and changing facilities. The provision of approximately 100 dwellings on the eastern part of the site
- Land at Horton Farm Allocated for: Approximately 1,250 dwellings including some specialist housing and self-build plots, 10 gypsy and traveller pitches, business incubation space, community building and a public park of approximately 7ha in addition to other green and blue infrastructure.

Related reports:

[Epsom and Ewell Local Plan Submitted for Examination](#)

[The Local Plan plot thickens after revised NPPF](#)

[Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in](#)

[Epsom and Ewell's Draft Local Plan goes to Full Council](#)

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Leatherhead to get new cinema and bowling alley?

24 April 2025



A new cinema or bowling alley could “breathe new life” into Leatherhead as part of major regeneration plans aimed at “reversing the trend of brands leaving the town”. Plans for the high street, Swan Centre and Bull Hill will be put on display this week with people invited to have their say on the proposals that will be among the biggest changes to the town in years. Mole Valley District Council and Kier Property are working together on the project and have said they were “excited to share” the new layouts that feature “significant updates” based on feedback from 2024.

A spokesperson for the project said: “The proposals... aim to breathe new life into the Swan Centre and Leatherhead High Street. This will be through investment in upgrades to the look and feel of the centre. We are also proposing to open up the main entrance to provide specific units to bring exciting and quality chains and independent restaurants and operators to Leatherhead.” The new layout will also include what is being described as a ‘cultural building’ on the first floor ‘to potentially include a cinema, bowling, activity centre to provide a great new entertainment offering in the town centre.

They added: “This investment will be a catalyst to improve the quality and variety of offer in both the Swan Centre and Leatherhead High Street, reversing the trend of brands leaving the town and shop closures.” To take the development further, the council and Kier Property - working together as a joint venture called The Leret Partnership, is calling on residents to give their views on the updated proposals.

Among the updates and refinements are an increase in public green space and new building layout in Bull Hill with two drop-in sessions being held this week to give people the opportunity to take a closer look. Both sessions will take place in the former Clinton Cards site within the Swan Centre. The first will run from 2pm to 8pm on Thursday, March 13, with the second taking place on Saturday, March 15 from 10am to 4pm. They are also being hosted on the Leret Partnership’s website.

Image: Swan Centre Proposal from the Leret Partnership (MVDC)

Related reports:

[River Mole to attract visitors to Leatherhead?](#)

[Leatherhead town on the way up?](#)

Dorking’s Green Gap narrowing

24 April 2025



Homes will be built on the former green belt gateway into Dorking – forever changing the character of the picturesque town.

Plans to turn more than eight hectares on the edge of the Surrey Hills into housing were approved on appeal in 2023 but details of what it would look like were only given the go-ahead last week. The decision was made despite many at the Wednesday, March 5, meeting airing concerns over traffic on the “poor” A25 and the impact of school coaches being pushed into the town’s one-way system. Councillors were hamstrung in their efforts to mitigate against the impact of the added traffic following the appeal ruling and could only vote on the plan’s layout.

Developers Taylor Wimpey, however, said the scheme, which would include 72 affordable homes, was an “exciting scheme for Dorking.” Speaking on behalf of the application was James Newton. He said the proposals bring “much-needed homes for the district” with “77 per cent of the mix being one to three-bedroom properties.” He added: “The affordable tenures include social and affordable rent, shared ownership and first homes and the mix has been agreed with the housing services team. The design has been amended over time with input from heritage officers... and takes cues from the Dorking vernacular and the wider area.” Homes, he said, will be sustainable with air source pumps and solar panels while the project as a whole would bring in more than £3million into Mole Valley District Council through community infrastructure payments. He finished: “This will be an exciting scheme for Dorking.”

The L-shaped site will take up two fields west of Dorking. The land was originally in the green belt when the decision to allow the homes was granted on appeal. Since then, it has been put into Mole Valley District Council’s local plan as a site designated for development. As well as the 144 homes, there will also be parking for The Priory Secondary School, including staff and coaches. Officers told the meeting they were happy with the project and that it would not harm the character of the area – with red tiling used to help it blend in with existing homes in the town.

Speaking against the plan was Nicholas Tinker, who highlighted the 60 letters of objection. He said: “144 dwellings will create, at least, 144 additional vehicles. More realistically, double that figure, most people leave for work at the same time every morning. The congestion on the Westcott Road and around town will be totally unacceptable.” Air quality, he said, would degenerate and reach dangerous levels for schoolchildren, with the coach drop-off point creating a particular problem and forcing them to use the one-way system. He said: “It’s going to be absolute chaos.”

Cllr Abhiram Magesh (Liberal Democrat; Mickleham, Westcott and Okewood) said: “I’m generally pro-affordable housing. Housing means more people, more people means more council tax for front-line services, more customers for local business, however, I’m quite torn on this particular development because I do feel it’s lacking in a number of ways. We’ve discussed quite adequately in the past that the highways assessment is quite lacking. We all know the trouble on the A25 – especially at peak time. I’m frankly torn about this because its layout is effectively a cul-de-sac which I think is generally quite poor planning strategy. So while I laud the affordable housing commitment, I’m extremely worried for a lot of my constituents in Westcott and Abinger who have to essentially travel every single day to get any form of amenity in Dorking. The A25 is of a poor quality as it is right now, so I’m not sure how at minimum 144 extra cars – how the road is going to be able to handle that.”

The designs and layout were approved by eight votes in favour, with two against and three abstentions.

Taylor Wimpey plans for 144 homes outside Dorking (image Taylor Wimpey/ Mole Valley Planning Portal)

Box Hill keeps its pie and mash

24 April 2025



The iconic Surrey Hills will keep its classic English pie and mash shop after plans were approved for the takeaway in Box Hill. Posha’s Pie and Mash Shop, in the rural Box Hill Road, Tadworth, was given the go-ahead at the second time of asking despite traffic officers again recommending its refusal. Surrey Highways said in January that the shop should be

refused permission over concerns of cars reversing onto the main road, and the application was deferred to allow the owners to make the needed changes.

The new plan removed the on-site parking that had caused concern, but Surrey Highways was still unimpressed, saying cars would now park in the nearby streets, clogging roads and pavements. Councillors disagreed and thought the shop should be encouraged as it would bring trade to the area as well as much-needed food options. Councillor Paul Potter (Liberal Democrat; Brockham, Betchworth, Buckland Box Hill and Headley) said the parking and traffic issues were overstated given the generally low levels of cars using Box Hill Road. He said: “(The pie and mash) is a vital part for a lot of people up there. For a lot of residents in the mobile homes, they walk there, they don’t drive - there are hundreds of mobile homes up there. It’s a vital thing for the community.”

Cllr Simon Bud (Conservative; Brockham, Betchworth, Buckland Box Hill and Headley) added: “It’s a rural business in a rural area, that’s what this is. They’re trying something quite different from what you normally see, and how good that is to see in a rural area on a rural road. How refreshing to see a car-free development. I cycle here, and if more of us did, we wouldn’t have this problem, would we? It’s really great to see a business that’s going forward and making it car-free.”

The site has been used as a pie and mash takeaway with a seating area since August 2023. The application was to formally change its use from the old dog grooming parlour. The Wednesday, March 5 meeting of Mole Valley District Council heard from one speaker against the proposal. She told the meeting that Porsha’s advertised on social media, which would draw in people from outside Box Hill. She said: “Cars park up on the pavement outside our house, which is the only pavement by the pie and mash. Indiscriminate parking narrows the road and interferes with the free flow of traffic and prohibits pedestrians from using the pavement. We also have a lot of teenagers who do their Duke of Edinburgh awards and walk along where the cars are parked with two wheels on the pavement. It is dangerous.”

The plans were ultimately passed with the unanimous backing of the committee.

Image - Credit Google Street view May 2023 the business’s food van