### Waverley not waiving planning fees spark protests

Angry homeowners hit with hefty planning bills and court threats gathered outside Waverley Borough Council to protest against levies that have left some at risk of losing their homes, or going to jail.

About 20 people have so far come forward with what they say are huge and unexpected infrastructure levies for work done to their homes.

They have been shocked by the short notice to come up with, in some cases, £70,000 for work they would have been expected to be exempt from - and would have been if they'd filled out a form.

Instead they have been pursued and threatened with court action if they do not pay.

On Tuesday April 1, those affected protested outside the council's executive meeting and challenged the authority on whether it had any "genuine intent" to review its Community Infrastructure Levy process.

Community Infrastructure Levies are payable on developments of more than 100 square metres, unless homeowners actively apply for an exemption. Large developers expect there to be an infrastructure charge, which can often take the form of community buildings such as a doctor's surgery or hall. Where these are not suitable money can be paid.

The levy is used to offset the impact development has on an area and can be bid for by public bodies or community groups for projects.

The problem has been some people feel they are being wrongly hit with the fees - and the heavy handed approach the council has taken in chasing the money.

In most cases the council says it has been correct in issuing the bills -despite anger from those who feel wronged.

The exception, it said, was the highest profile case so far, of Steve and Caroline Dally who were stung with a £70,000 bill for a home extension and given no opportunity to argue their case.

The rest, the council argues are not as straightforward - with any long-term solutions not expected until at least May,

Councillor Liz Townsend, portfolio holder for planning said: "I can assure members here and residents that the council is committed to carrying out a discretionary review where householders previously subject to CIL liability can request a discretionary review."

She added: "There have been a number of extremely speculative and scaremongering comments about the nature of this review by some councillors which is very concerning.

"However I would like to assure residents again that we are committed to investigating and assessing each individual case that is submitted to the council and the process for undertaking this will be fully disclosed in the report coming to the executive at the beginning of May."

However, asked if the council had powers to withdraw liability notices for "whatever reasons it sees appropriate" the leader, Cllr Paul Follows, responded: "I think we are comfortable to acknowledge that's what the regulation says. Yes. I don't think there is anything else I can add to that but I am sure what the regulation says."

Asked "For whatever reason you deem fit?"

Cllr Follows replied:"Yes - but at the same time I do think you have to recognise we can't in ourselves act unlawfully in the withdrawal of the CIL liability - there are things we have to do here.

"This is not a straightforward process. If anybody has been advising you that it is a straightforward process I would consider widening your advice.

"One of the problems here - we've effectively got three categories of individuals in this process.

"Individuals who may have had some fault of the council, and although we're still checking the details, for example would be Mr Dally who we've looked at - and most of us have concluded he was told something in error and I think there will probably be some remediation that takes place there.

"There are individuals who have been advised poorly...as part of their building project. Yes I can understand their frustration with the council but actually their issue is with the private advice which has been inaccurate and their first course of resolution would be through the liability insurance of the private advisor.

"And thirdly there are individuals that disagree with the concept of homeowner CIL but have been charged legally for it at this point of time and that's subject to a different discussion of whether we should charge homeowners or not.

"It broadly falls into those three camps."

The council said it would be taking this final group into consideration in May when it is due to discuss potential changes to CIL.

A longer term solution is not likely to be finalised until the council's local plan – effectively the planning rules it must abide by – is signed off in 2027.

Image: Waverley CIL protests (image Waverley Conservative Council Group)

#### **Surrey SEND parents owed money**

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

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 though 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**

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

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

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?

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

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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**Gatwick Airport Expansion** 

Report against airport expansion

Heathrow expansion reaction

Heathrow Airport. Credit Heathrow Airports Limited.

## Drowning in Debt: Epsom MP Demands Thames Water Takeover

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.

Related reports:

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

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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