

Epsom and Ewell’s new housing targets in Surrey perspective

18 December 2024



Housing targets in Surrey are set to skyrocket, with some areas expected to deliver double the number of homes under new Government plans. On December 12, the long-awaited update to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published, setting out what councils and developers can and cannot do - leaving boroughs and districts “disappointed” and “deeply concerned.” Across Surrey, the number of new homes expected each year has risen by 4,635 to a total of 10,981, with some areas bearing a significantly heavier load than others.

Worst affected is Elmbridge Borough Council, where housing targets have more than doubled, from 653 to 1,562. This increase comes alongside the prospect of having no local plan, giving developers greater freedom over where and what to build. A spokesperson for Elmbridge Borough Council said they were “reviewing the new NPPF and its implications for Elmbridge’s Local Plan.” The council was told in November that its housing strategy must be withdrawn and restarted or risk being deemed “unsound.” A decision on next steps will be made in February 2025.

Other boroughs facing substantial increases include Waverley, where targets have risen from 710 to 1,481, and Reigate and Banstead, which sees an increase from 644 to 1,306. Woking, the only council to see its figure drop, still faces a significant rise from 436 to 794. These adjustments align largely with July consultation targets. However, Woking residents hoping for a break in town-center skyscraper developments and green belt preservation will be disappointed, as the reduction amounted to just one unit from the earlier proposal.

Housing targets for Surrey boroughs under the new NPPF are as follows:

		Old housing target	New NPPF target	% increase
1	Elmbridge	653	1562	139
2	Surrey Heath	320	684	114
3	Waverley	710	1481	109
4	Reigate & Banstead	644	1306	103
5	Woking	436	794	82
6	Mole Valley	460	833	81
7	Guildford	743	1170	57
8	Epsom & Ewell	569	889	56
9	Tandridge	634	843	33
10	Spelthorne	631	793	26
11	Runnymede	546	626	15
	SURREY	6346	10981	73

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council’s executive member for planning, Councillor Rich Michalowski, described the Government’s decision not to heed their feedback as “disappointing.” He said, “The borough’s housing target in the new NPPF of 1,306 homes per year is nearly three times higher than our current local plan target of 460 and more than double the previous NPPF target of 644 homes. These changes will have severe implications for Reigate and Banstead’s green belt and the character of our towns and villages. The standard methodology for calculating housing is flawed, as it doesn’t account for environmental and infrastructure constraints.” He emphasized the council’s commitment to exploring all urban development options but acknowledged that a Green Belt Review might be unavoidable.

Waverley Borough Council echoed these concerns, particularly regarding the methodology and its impact on green belt. Cllr Liz Townsend, Waverley’s portfolio holder for planning, called the more than two-fold increase “unrealistic and uncalled for.” She noted that the requirement for 1,481 new homes annually is two and a half times the current target and could increase the borough’s population by 50% over 20 years. “There is simply no evidence of this level of demand, nor that building this many homes would make them more affordable,” she said. Cllr Townsend highlighted the borough’s existing issues, including water supply disruptions, sewage overflows, a crumbling rural road network, overstretched health services, and power shortages stalling new developments.

All councils must now face the new reality as their starting points for planning new homes. Each borough will need to

demonstrate to Independent Planning Inspectors that they have explored all possible avenues for delivering these targets. This challenge will require balancing housing needs with environmental, infrastructure, and community considerations.

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Campaigners have set up a petition against the new targets:

<https://www.change.org/p/excessive-targets-for-new-homes-in-surrey>

Surrey: Free school buses withdrawn

18 December 2024



Free school buses are being axed after a cross-country route was judged safe by Surrey County Council. Parents say the letter outlining the new walkable route explicitly states that the “personal safety issues of children travelling alone” were not considered. About 81 children from Esher High School are said to be affected. Compounding the problem, the council has stated that further funding to increase capacity on regular bus services is not available.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service understands parents are appealing the decision and have been in touch with Surrey Police. This comes just weeks after parents in South Nutfield were told children could walk across open rail tracks and flood-prone cow fields as the county council looks to make further service cuts.

Children who live more than three miles from their nearest school are eligible for free buses. The new route across the heath reduces the distance to just under that mark, meaning the children no longer qualify for the service. The council says the move will save about £180,000 per year and create space on “stretched coach resources to provide travel assistance to those eligible.”

One of the affected parents, Plamena Naydenova, received a letter that included directions on how her children could get to school, with 30 separate steps to follow. Among the instructions were phrases like “take the alleyway,” “follow the footpaths through Molesey Heath Nature Reserve,” and “turn right through the squeeze stile.” Later, children are told to “cross the River Mole Viaduct Sluice.”

Mrs. Naydenova said: “How can you call an 83-minute walk through dark heaths and unlit river paths a safe route? It’s just honestly outrageous, the whole thing. It isn’t about one child, it’s a principle. It will affect many families, not just my two children. I walked it with my sister as I was afraid to walk it on my own. It goes through narrow alleyways, fields, mud along the embankment of the River Mole, with no fencing.”

She added: “The bit that annoys me the most is the word safe—or safe for an accompanied child. Parents must accompany them, but the council doesn’t see that other parents have other children to drop off or work commitments. I would need to leave the house at 7 a.m. to get to Esher. How would I get the other children to school, never mind my work commitments? It’s very, very shocking. We all know it’s about the money and cost-cutting. But be honest and transparent—say ‘we can’t afford to pay anymore,’ not that there’s a new safe route.”

Since the shock email, parents have banded together. They understand about 81 other students have been impacted. Very few are expected to take on the route and, if their appeal fails, will instead use the standard bus network—although these services, she said, are often full, leaving school children at stops.

Mrs. Naydenova said: “It will put a lot of pressure on the existing paid buses. We aren’t going to let them walk across the heath. We only have one car, so the only other option is cycling, but how safe is that?”

Travel assistance will run until the end of the school year, but from September 2025, children will need to find alternative routes unless there is a change.

Surrey County Council’s cabinet member for children, families, and lifelong learning, Councillor Clare Curran, said the route to Esher High School was established following “individual safe walking route assessments” applied in line with national guidelines. She explained: “It is important to note that the guidelines consider the relationship between pedestrians and traffic, and assessments are undertaken on the assumption that the child will be accompanied by an appropriate adult if necessary. The Department for Education’s own school transport guidance also supports this position.

It is suggested that suitable footwear and a torch are used where needed.”

She added: “The council provides contracted coaches to those eligible for travel assistance to Esher High School. By limiting the services only to those eligible in line with statutory guidance, the council expects a cost saving of approximately £180k per year, as well as the benefit of utilizing the stretched coach resources to provide travel assistance to those eligible. The national picture is of increased demand on transport services and therefore council budgets. We spent £64.9m in 2023/24 on home-to-school travel costs for around 10.7k children and young people.

“We take our responsibilities regarding home-to-school transport very seriously; however, we must balance this with our duty to ensure we are only using public funds for those who meet statutory guidelines for free transport or who are most in need of assistance. Amidst a set of challenging financial circumstances, the council is not in a position to continue to pay for transport for families where they are no longer eligible for assistance due to a safe route being established.”

Related report:

Surrey school kids’ country walk saving money

Image: Surrey County Council’s recommended safe route to Esher High School (Palamena Naydenova)

Examination of a Surrey Borough’s 2nd highest UK debt

18 December 2024



The review into Spelthorne Borough Council’s £1 billion debt and whether it is upholding its duty to provide best value to residents has been extended. In May, the government wrote to the heavily leveraged local authority, the second most indebted borough council in the country, over concerns surrounding its debt conditions and financial management arrangements. It has now written again to say it is extending its deadline until January 31, 2025, with the scope of the inspection remaining unchanged. The Government first began engaging with Spelthorne Borough Council in May 2022 over its capital risk, and the review covers concerns over how the council is governed, the strength of its audits, scrutiny and risk arrangements, and in particular its finances. Its debt is second only to bankrupt Woking among borough councils.

A Spelthorne Borough Council spokesperson said of the delay: “The snap general election earlier this year interrupted the appointment of the Best Value Inspection team. The delayed appointments have had a knock-on impact on the original timeline, which has resulted in this extension.” The council’s extremely high levels of debt and borrowing, as of March 2023, stood at £1.1 billion, which is 87.1 times the borough’s core spending power (CSE) and 52.4 times its total service expenditure. By comparison, the average CSE for councils such as Spelthorne is 5.6. Spelthorne has followed a similar path to other Surrey authorities such as Woking, Runnymede, and Surrey Heath, borrowing vast amounts to fund regeneration projects in the hope of creating long-term revenues. Many councils have used this to stave off real-term cuts to their spending power and maintain services residents value. The problem arises, as in Woking’s case, when local authorities can no longer afford to pay back their loans, or if income from the investments is too low. While Spelthorne Borough Council has not yet reached that stage, the Government is seeking assurances that its long-term position is secure.

Between December 2016 and August 2018, Spelthorne Borough Council bought eight investment properties for a cost of about £1 billion. It borrowed largely from the Public Works Loans Board to generate income that supports its revenue budget, enabling it to maintain a wide range of discretionary services. As of December 31, 2022, the council’s total borrowing stood at some £1.1 billion, with £1.08 billion from the Public Works Loans Board—the same body that lent to Woking Borough Council and numerous others. The council plans to borrow a further £332 million between 2023 and 2027, with most of this spread across the next two financial years, and has set its authorised borrowing limit at £1.45 billion for the next four years. The Government has also highlighted a KPMG Public Interest Report on the council’s 2017/18 accounts, published in November 2022, which raised concerns about Spelthorne’s investments and stated the auditor’s view that the authority acted unlawfully in borrowing to purchase three properties in 2017/18.

The vast majority of Spelthorne’s property portfolio, 95 percent, consists of office buildings, with just ten tenants accounting for 75 percent of its lettings income, and one tenant—BP—providing £18 million in rental income annually. About half of its leases end within 10 years and 94 percent within 15 years, creating pressure to retain key tenants. This reliance was highlighted when the loss of a previous tenant resulted in a £4 million loss, including £2.4 million linked to a Russian-owned tenant affected by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. A July 2023 report noted: “Although Spelthorne Borough Council has effective mitigations in place, this cannot provide complete protection. The loss of a major tenant can impair

commercial income.” The council is projected to face an income shortfall of £10 million over the next two years due to these challenges. Additionally, the devaluation of its assets adds to its risks. Spelthorne spent £952 million on eight major purchases that collectively were worth £882 million as of 2022, with only the Sunbury Business Park increasing in value, rising from £384 million to £387 million. However, this gain is overshadowed by losses, such as the Charter Building in Uxbridge, purchased for £135.98 million but valued at £99 million. These devaluations mean that if the council needs to sell assets, it could face a significant deficit.

Despite these challenges, the council insists that the rental income from its commercial property portfolio exceeds financing costs and contributes significantly to discretionary services. “Annually these contribute approximately £10 million net to the council’s revenue budget, enabling the council to continue delivering services that would otherwise have to be cut, including valued services such as Meals on Wheels or community centres,” stated a Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy report. The same report, titled the Spelthorne Borough Council Review of Debt/Investment Risk Profile July 2023, also warned of a significant budget deficit of £9.306 million projected over the next three financial years. Responding to the original best value review, a council spokesperson said: “We welcome the independent review and will work with the inspector and her team. This administration has taken many decisive and positive steps since the May 2023 election, including instigating a full external independent review of our commercial property portfolio. Additionally, we have reduced future borrowing requirements by nearly £200 million and are pursuing alternative ways to deliver more affordable housing. We will continue to work with (the government) in an open and transparent way and look forward to receiving the findings of the report. The rental income received from our commercial property portfolio more than covers the financing costs and provides a significant contribution to support council services, additionally, there is a reserve to cover possible income variation in future years.”

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[Spelthorne Borough Council offices in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp](#)

Surrey schools not out for so long in summer?

18 December 2024



Surrey County Council is looking at possible changes to school holidays.

A consultation has been launched on whether the county council should switch to a two-week half term break in the autumn - and is asking for families to give their feedback before making a decision.

About one in ten state-funded schools have already made the switch, including some in Surrey.

It has led some families facing added challenges when term times at different schools are not aligned.

If the switch to a two-week autumn half term break goes ahead, the added five days would be clawed back from the summer break, although the council said it would look to minimise this reduction “where there are opportunities to recover days through the natural positioning of bank holidays during the Christmas and Easter breaks”.

The consultation letter sent to parents read: “We are seeking to understand the views of all stakeholders in determining our future approach to term dates and if there is any appetite for change.

“This will enable the council, schools and multi-academy trusts to work in partnership to set term dates with an aim for more consistency for schools, school staff, and families.

“We acknowledge that there may be strong views on either side of this question, but we feel it is right and responsible to seek those opinions at a time when we are seeing movement towards a longer October half term by some schools.

“The combined responses from education settings, families and partners will help inform our approach to term dates for the 2026/27 academic year onwards.

“If it is determined that there is significant appetite for change, the council will adopt a two-week autumn half term break from the 2026/2027 academic year at the earliest.”

The survey runs until the end of the year, and closes at 5pm on Tuesday December 31 2024.

The school year would still be 195 days, including the five inset training days for staff.

Fly-tipping bags and BB gun shots close Bagshot recycle centre

18 December 2024



Bagshot community recycling centre will close in an effort to protect staff from being threatened with violence, Surrey County Council has said.

The depot has been plagued with issues for years with people “dodging bb bullets”, catapults fired, angle grinders used in break ins, and staff put in danger by those dumping hazardous waste, senior councillors said.

The closure would not save the authority money, they said, as alternate sites will have to their hours extended to deal with the knock on.

Waste contractors Suez has recorded 801 instances of fly tipping across all Surrey recycling sites between January 2019 and August 2024. Of these, 531 (66 per cent) were at Bagshot.

A nuisance report listed examples of flytipping at the site as well as details of break ins such as when an “angle grinder was taken to the office shutter” and “oil thrown around site”.

Other times vandals broke in and left fluorescent tubes “smashed over the site”.

Some of the break ins forced the recycling centre to close, while on June 17 “Someone fired a bb gun towards members of the public” which was later reported to the police.

Campaigners had argued that the centre was valued by the community and rather than give up on Bagshot, money should be spent on modernising and making it safer.

They argued that closing the Bagshot centre would make it harder, longer, and more expensive for many people to recycle their waste.

Councillor Natalie Bramhall, cabinet member for property, waste and infrastructure, told the Tuesday, November 26. meeting at Surrey County Council: “Suez keeps the site safe, but it has inherent problems which are not present at other community recycling centres.

“For many many years the site has suffered from overnight vandalism and unlawful ingress.

“Containers, particularly those used for electricals, are regularly forced open and plundered and the site office has been vandalised.

“The perimeter fence has been driven into and fly tipping left outside the gates and tipped over the fences.

“Prevention measures, whatever we do, things get broken, they use catapults to knock out all the lights, they used angle grinders to get the fence and into the office and vandalise.

“Suez staff receive threats and have to deal with materials delivered to the site that are hazardous and not allowed on the site but they have to turn a blind eye to this because they are threatened with violence.”

The report described the Swift Lane site as small, unmodernised and not fit for purpose.

It serves around 7,000 people in the Bagshot area who will be redirected to Camberley. Those who came from further afield, such as Windsor and Maidenhead, will be directed to the recycling centre in Lyne, Runnymede.

Subject to Surrey Heath Borough Council approval, it is anticipated that Bagshot tip will close immediately prior to the new tenant moving onto the site. This is likely to take place in December 2024.

Photo: Bagshot Recycling Centre (Image Surrey CC)

Dorking Halls to reopen after upgrade

18 December 2024



The official reopening date for Dorking Halls is days away and a special ceremony has been announced to mark the occasion.

Mole Valley District Council was forced to close its veritable old venue in June so it could undergo a £11million facelift, to take place over two phases, to replace the 1930s plaster ceiling in the grand hall together with much needed mechanical and electrical work to its stage and internal workings.

Now, the first stage of that work, which has so far cost £4m, is done and Dorking Halls will reopen its doors on Monday, December 9 with screenings of Paddington in Peru, Wicked and Gladiator 2.

Then, from December 20 the big winter panto Sleeping Beauty takes to the stage, complete with 3D laser projections.

Ahead of the big day the council is also hosting a special reopening celebration the Friday before to show off the upgraded site, which will also feature newly enlarged toilet provision, and a draft lobby.

Speaking about the soon to be reopened Dorking Halls, leader of the council, Councillor Stephen Cooksey said: "I wanted to update you of an 'early Christmas present'.

"The work to replace the Grand Hall ceiling at Dorking Halls has gone brilliantly well and our entertainment venue will be re-opening as planned on Monday December 9, with the panto, 'Sleeping Beauty' beginning not long after on the 20 December and running until the end of the month.

"Whilst Dorking Halls has been closed, the opportunity has been taken to upgrade our film projectors meaning that they will not only present even better-quality visuals, but also run in a greener, more energy efficient, manner.

"So, be prepared for an invigorated cinema experience when the Halls reopens with a comprehensive events screening and film listing."

The second phase of the project's £11m refurbishment will take place in 2025 and will focus on replacing "critical mechanical and electrical systems" - said to be its heating and cooling plant - that are near the end of their useful lives.

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Sorry Surrey Borough for "shameful" past

18 December 2024



Woking Borough Council has apologised for the "shameful" behaviour of its past.

The bankrupt council met last night to hear from the authors of the long-awaited review into how the authority went bust.

The council saddled itself with debts of about £2billion - borrowed to fund failed investments and regeneration that has left residents facing years of huge tax hikes and cuts to services.

The Grant Thornton Report found 'potentially unlawful' lending, failures of leadership, borrowing to lend to third parties, a £3m "opportunities fund" overseen by the former chief executive Ray Morgan, potential scope for conflicts of interest, and poor decision making such as borrowing £700m to buy an asset now worth approximately £205m.

The council held the extraordinary meeting to consider the report's findings where, as expected, it accepted the findings and recommendations in full.

Surrey Police has been contacted by the borough's chief executive to make clear that any evidence of criminality or misfeasance in public office will be referred to them for investigation.

Although it is unclear, given the state of record keeping during the period in question, what the outcomes of this may be, the meeting heard.

A separate legal challenge pursued through the courts could be explored, but would require new instructions from the council.

Not on the original papers, but added during the debate, was the formal apology.

Cllr Leslie Rice (Liberal Democrats; Heathlands) said: "Humility does not belong to the political class generally.

A humble politician is an oxymoron or a paradox I'm not sure which. But I think in this situation...we should be showing collective humility this evening as Woking Borough Council.

"While we are different members of the council, the council itself is responsible for these legacy problems, these historical problems.

"We should apologise to the people of Woking. The situation we have is shameful.

"It's shameful (too) on our government, our historic governments going way back, that we completely lack proper regulation and oversight of the local government sector.

"We should apologise to the people of Woking."

The two and a half hour meeting began with leader of the opposition Cllr Amanda Boote (Independent; Byfleet and West Byfleet) paying tribute to former member John Bond, a long-standing critic of the council's financial handling, but who died earlier this year.

Her words were echoed by many of those who spoke.

Addressing the council, she called the report cathartic, shocking and sad "especially for all of the residents of Woking who we have collectively let down.

She said: "Residents will continue to feel the impact of this for many many years to come.

"I think the most important thing is we have to learn lessons now, hard lessons so that history can never repeat itself."

She added: "I want to pay tribute to my predecessor and founder of our independent group the late councillor John Bond.

"Since first becoming a councillor in 2014 and until he retired in 2021 Cllr Bond fought constantly to highlight the wrongdoings of the previous corporate management group and of the previous administration.

"Highlighting the wholly inadequate governance, poor investment decisions, poor accounting lack of transparency.

"And it's sad that he was belittled and laughed at. He even resorted to writing many newspaper articles to try to get his voice heard.

"This is not about political point scoring but I couldn't let tonight go by without paying tribute to Councillor Bond and all of his hard work and scrutiny in trying to stop this disaster from ever happening."

In a statement released after the meeting, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, leader of Woking Borough Council, said that the Grant Thornton public interest report confirmed what many residents already felt; that their council had let them down.

She said: "Years of mismanagement, poor governance and a disregard for the risks have left our community burdened with unsustainable debt. These systemic failings betrayed the trust residents placed in the council and have had far-reaching consequences.

"On behalf of Woking Borough Council I want to apologise for these unacceptable failings of the past.

She added: "By implementing the auditor's recommendations, we are taking decisive action to secure a better future for Woking and the residents we serve."

Another solar power story - Leatherhead

18 December 2024



A four-year fight to install solar panels in a Leatherhead car park has left those behind the green project both "disappointed and very excited".

Mole Valley District Council declared a climate emergency in 2019 and has been trying to decrease its carbon emissions ever since, with the goal of reaching net zero by 2030.

Now, a pilot scheme set to be approved could be a step in the right direction – but has left some wishing for a “far more expansive” roll out, after funding was approved to cover just 20 bays in Leatherhead with the new tech, the size of about two tennis courts.

Bays in the centre’s car park will have new coverings with solar panelling installed on top. Electricity from the panels will be used to help power Leatherhead Leisure Centre although it will fall well short of delivering its full need.

It is anticipated that the electricity generated annually by the solar panels will be 37,498 kWh or about 2.7 per cent of what the centre uses – although it would still be enough to reduce the council’s carbon footprint by about 9.7 tonnes a year.

Hope is not lost for those wishing to see greater role out of the panels as the council has said that, should key milestones and performance targets be hit, “the intention is that further role out of solar carparks across other Mole Valley District Council carparks including Pippbrook Offices and Reigate Road will be implemented”.

Cabinet Member Councillor Claire Malcomson said: “It’s taken four years to get this far.

“I’m disappointed and very excited about this because at long last we’re going to be doing it, I would love it to be far more expansive but it is only a pilot therefore hopefully it’s going to open some really good doors for us.”

The £175,000 project is expected to take about 16 years to cover its costs and the levels of energy produced too low to require battery storage units.

Regardless, the system will be plugged into the national grid with any spare capacity sold into the network – the most likely scenario here being on days the centre is closed.

She said: “It would take 16 years to pay itself back and I just hope we will consider it as its a very good step in the right direction because other councils are taking over but it was actually Mole Valley that initiated this in the first place.”

A similar project is already in place in the Elmbridge Civic Centre car park in Esher.

Cllr Andy Smith (Independent; Ashted Lanes and Common) said: “This is a very good scheme indeed.

“I share the disappointment that its taken so long to get off the ground but I’m very keen that we seize the opportunities for this type of solar project rather than using up productive agricultural land with solar arrays.”

Final sign off on the plans are dependent on cabinet approval.

Leatherhead Leisure Centre (Image Google)

Mole Valley Bankruptcy warning

18 December 2024



Mole Valley District Council is facing bankruptcy and must make “very difficult decisions” over the future of its services.

The bleak warning came during the Tuesday, November 12 scrutiny committee when the grim outlook was laid bare to councillors.

Unless the council makes significant savings then “in all scenarios” reserves would fall significantly below minimum levels required in 2026/27 and be exhausted between 2027 and 2029, officers said.

Councils must balance their budgets and failure to do so can lead to section 114 bankruptcy notices being issued. When this happens all new spending must stop.

Anything other than drastic cuts would put Mole Valley “at such significant financial risk” that the council’s chief financial officer would likely be legally bound to consider using statutory powers – with commissioners brought in and the council losing day-to-day control of how it is run.

Mole Valley District Council’s executive head of service (finance and strategy) Claire Morris said: “Essentially every local authority is facing very challenging savings targets.

“It is difficult. I think I need to be really honest and quite blunt with councillors, all the low hanging fruit, the easy wins, have been taken. We are now into making some very difficult decisions potentially. To achieve that savings target you will be asked to make some very difficult decisions.

“The alternative is equally less palatable. What we see by authorities that got into trouble and issued notices... is that they get taken over by commissioners and you lose control of your council. “So I can not give you any confidence that we will definitely achieve those savings targets. “What I can say is that we will all, councillors included, work very very hard

to achieve those savings and identify them.

“We should be honest with our staff and what this might impact on our services. “It’s the honesty we will now have to face up to.”

The most high profile example of a council going effectively bankrupt locally is Woking Borough Council with debts approaching £2billion, with other Surrey councils also facing their own issues.

Mole Valley District Council must find £1.8m savings this year but has only managed to achieve £493,000 so far and is expected to fall short by about £1.2million.

Future years look even more challenging with costs expected to increase, and revenues fall.

The council currently makes enough money from its commercial investments to cover the annual interest rates and debt repayment costs, the meeting heard, but “is facing increased tenancy risks and additional costs as commercial leases are approaching break points or end dates and tenants are vacating the properties”, council documents said.

The council also expects any new tenancy agreements to be at lower values than at present.

Additionally there is “the risk of the council needing to incur significant capital costs of refurbishing investment properties but without a commensurate increase in income”.

Short term cash flows have been hit by a double whammy of the council failing to sell assets, and the being unable to find anyone willing to rent office space in its civic centre.

Claire Morris, the council’s chief financial officer, said: “A key area was around the letting of vacant office space within this building

“We have not yet found a tenant. We are still marketing the property, so that is ongoing, but we are continuing to market and hopeful that we will get a tenant.”

As it stands, the council then must find a further £760,000 of savings or income for the 2026/27 financial year.

“It is also recommended that the council starts to develop plans to deliver at least £1.3million of further transformation savings for 2027/28 and 2028/29.”

During that time the council is forecasting its return on assets for decrease, while budgets had inflation forecasts at 2 per cent - adding pressure.

Councillor Gerry Sevenoaks, committee chair, added: “What is in front of us is undoubtedly some very high savings targets.”

Surrey school kids’ country walk saving money

18 December 2024



Children have been told they can walk 4.9km through fields and over an unguarded railway line by Surrey County Council bureaucrats who cancelled their free bus passes.

The decision has left their family feeling “let down” and “frustrated” after the vital service relied upon for years was cut because a 10 kilometre hike was found by county hall officials.

Joe Massey was sent the letter informing him of the council’s decision after a “review” found the route was considered a safe walking route for children travelling from South Nutfield to Carrington School in Redhill.

The free bus service historically served the area but the so-called discovery of the new route means notice has been served on those who depended on the county council’s travel assistance.

Normally, free bus access is only provided to those who live more than three miles from their chosen school.

South Nutfield is within that distance but the narrow lanes linking the village to the school are unsafe for young people to walk along.

Now the council has written to parents telling them that a new 4.95 kilometre route - across muddy fields and unprotected railway lines is a suitable alternative - but as a precaution children should wear suitable footwear as the farmer’s field is prone to flooding.

The instructions, seen by the LDRS, on how the children should get to school read: “Follow the public right of way until

you reach Mid Street.

“In places it is narrow, and it can be muddy with surface water, occasionally liable to flooding so appropriate footwear would be advisable after inclement weather.

“There are two stiles to climb over; these are easily scaled.

“The train track is an open crossing with no gates, barriers, attendant or traffic lights. The sightlines in both directions are long, straight and clear. It is a rural line, Redhill to Tonbridge, on average there are two trains per hour and occasionally a freight train making it safe to cross.”

Adding: “The public right of way continues across a farmer’s field which it can be muddy with surface water, occasionally liable to flooding.”

The decision was taken by the Surrey Travel & Assessment team alongside the Safer Travel team who had reviewed a number of routes across the county previously been deemed unsafe.

They team wrote: “We understand that this may be disappointing news, however we have undertaken a thorough investigation into your child’s current eligibility, applying the travel assistance policy robustly, and this is the resulting outcome. “

Joe Massey, said they have two boys who will be impacted, one in year 10 the other in year 7.

He said: “We qualify for the council’s assisted travel scheme because the nearest school to us is over three miles away but we’ve received a letter f saying that as of September next year they’re going to be cancelling both passes - because they’ve found an alternative route that’s less than three miles.

“A big chunk of it is cross country through cow fields and rail roads with no bridge. It’s just open tracks.

“It’s a public right of way. We did the walk, there’s a cow field, you’re wading through mud.

“The council says it’s fine because its only 2.96 miles but the app says 3.06.”

“Some of the roads are really uncomfortable to walk along and to expect anyone to do it, especially in winter, is just unsuitable.

“And the fields are not lit at all; it’s just plain dangerous.”

Mr Massey said: “I’m extremely frustrated by the situation. Obviously the money is a big thing but it’s the principle.

“It took us an hour to do it, there’s no way in hell you’d send your child on that route.

“To then expect your child to walk for an hour ,they’re going to be exhausted.

“My wellies were caked in mud - they said in the letter to wear suitable footwear.

“It’s traumatic enough at secondary school but to have to carry muddy wellies around all day....

“We just feel let down and the option they’ve given us is just unbelievable.

“If any normal human being would have looked at that route, I can’t believe they would have sent the letter.”

Clare Curran, SCC cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning said: “This route has been established between South Nutfield and Carrington School following individual Safe Walking Route assessments that were carried out by the council.

“Safety of route assessments are carried out in line with Road Safety GB Guidelines. It is important to note that this is an assessment of the road safety of a walked route by an accompanied child - national guidance advises that the child should be “accompanied as necessary”. It is the expectation that the child, and the accompanying adult, will wear appropriate clothing and footwear for the conditions underfoot.

“The current travel assistance provided by the council is an annual bus pass on a public bus service. This costs the Council £881 per year for each pupil. In line with statutory guidance, these pupils are no longer eligible to receive a free bus pass through the council. Amidst a set of challenging financial circumstances, the council is not in the position to continue to pay for transport for families where they are no longer eligible for assistance, due to a safe route being established.

“The council is not prescribing that children should walk to school via the safe route that has been established; the option is still available to use the bus service. Families will be able to purchase a bus pass directly from the operator to continue to use the bus. Families can appeal against the decision to withdraw travel assistance via the stage one safety of route appeal form, and a link to this was included in the initial correspondence with the family.”

Image Joe Massey - on the new school walk

Another Surrey borough’s Local Plan agony

18 December 2024



More than 800 homes will be built on Surrey green belt land as part of a 15 year plan for 9,270 new properties in the north of the county.

It comes after **Spelthorne Borough Council** agreed, last week, to reinstate 13 green belt sites it had removed from its local plan in February.

Opponents have said delays to the borough’s planning bible, which sets out where and the types of development that can go ahead for the next 15 years, has turned Spelthorne into “clarion” to be picked off by “vultures”.

The council said it changed its position in order to get its housing plan approved under lower targets of 618 a year versus potentially the 700 plus that could come in under national changes to planning law.

Councillor Darren Clarke (Conservative, Laleham and Shepperton Green) spoke out against the hold ups saying residents were “sold a pup” and councillors unable to stop unwanted development.

He said: “The lack of a local plan means that we don’t have a five year housing supply.

“This tilts decisions in favour of development, and away from not developing so when we are lobbied by residents to oppose builds we are told by officers that we have no reasons to object.

“We can reject it as the committee and do because we know what good looks like, however the planners can and do apply those with the most money know they will win and we need to pay their expensive legal costs as well

“So we not only end up with buildings which we do not want, lived in by people from potentially outside the borough, hindering, not helping the borough but also a legal bill for us and them, and who pays this, yes the residents.

“We are in a time of planning approval by appeal with developer vultures circling looking at us like carrion.

“What this short sighted administration has done is harm the borough make us look like a laughing stock and cost the residents in hard pounds.

‘It’s been almost fingers in ears and la la la”

His speech was rebutted by borough leader, Cllr Joanne Sexton who said the so called “pathetic excuse” to delay the local plan had been to protect residents from flooding rather than any quarrels over green belt.

She told the meeting that she was proud and delighted with the work that had gone in to ensure “that now have a statement of common ground with the Environment Agency, who is a key stakeholder, and knows exactly what it is that they needed from us, and I am extremely proud today to be here to be able to take this forward.”

Officially the council paused the inspector’s examination of its local plan in December 2023 “to allow for training of newly elected councillors” and to consider potential changes to national planning policy.

In February 2024, the council asked the inspector to remove all green belt allocations, with the exception of the two sites for Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople.

The council has now decided to return the 13 protected green belt sites back into the plan so they can be used for housing - before going back to the planning inspector with any proposed changes.

The saga dates back even further with the Secretary of State ordering the council to not pause its plan in September 2023 after councillors asked for a hiatus in June - just a month after examination hearings had started at the end of May.

In all, there will be 855 new homes built on Spelthorne’s green belt, of which 438 will be affordable.

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

No wonder Woking went bankrupt. Scandal of private school loans

18 December 2024



A private school was loaned millions of pounds at favourable rates by Woking Borough Council before it went bankrupt. Now questions are being asked as to whether an independent inquiry will be launched into the “extraordinary use of taxpayer’s money”.

Greenfield School in Old Woking has loans of £13,257,756 according to full accounts published in September on Companies House.

Interest is just one percentage point above the Public Works Loans Board rate. The cash was originally borrowed by Woking Borough Council for “capital projects” before being passed on to the school.

Since then the council’s finances have collapsed under the weight of its unprecedented multi-billion debt from all the money it can not afford to repay – and its investment decisions have come under close scrutiny.

The matter of its role as effectively a bank was raised during the October 17 full meeting of Woking Borough Council.

The local authority was asked directly if it would set-up an independent inquiry into the extraordinary use of taxpayers’ money into the 2019 loan to Greenfield preparatory school, reportedly topping £11m.

According to the school’s set of accounts, its fees, which brought in more than £5m last year, are very carefully controlled and exceptional value for money.

Greenfield, the accounts said, is highly competitive when compared to other independent educational establishments within the wider Woking area.

In January 2021, Greenfield opened Little School, a 50.4 week a year day-care for children aged from six months to four years. In April 2022 the school opened its new buildings and took on extra staff.

The council’s loan was challenged on the grounds that the money was not used for regeneration and education is not in the remit of a borough council.

Woking Borough Council was asked: “Will the council set-up an independent inquiry into the extraordinary use of taxpayers’ money into the loan to the single entity, Greenfield preparatory school?”

Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, who took over as leader of Woking Borough Council after the loans had been agreed.

She said: “In July 2023, the council asked Grant Thornton, its newly appointed external auditors, to undertake a ‘Value for Money’ review, looking into the governance arrangements that relate to the council’s historic investment strategy.

“This is an independent report which is reviewing how past decisions (such as those related to Greenfield School) were made and the financial impact of these decisions on the Council’s financial sustainability.

“Grant Thornton have indicated that the Value for Money report will likely be published in October 2024.

“The council will make the Value for Money review report, alongside our response to its recommendations, available on our website at the earliest opportunity.

“It is important to wait for the findings of the independent review before coming to any conclusions regarding individual decisions.”

The school is a registered charity in Old Woking and has the benefit of extensive playing fields. In addition it takes advantage of Woking’s Pool in the Park to offer swimming lessons.

The school hosts community events including annual maths and English challenges, anti-bullying training, and football tournaments.

Pupil numbers are growing at a rapid rate and income from charitable activities increased by £582,037 to £5.3m- of which £5.2m was through school fees.

Overall the school made a loss of £502,562 last year according to its accounts and it has loans totalling £13,316,871, of which £13,257,756 is listed as “other loans”.

Its annual set of accounts read: “The loans were obtained to purchase a new site for the school. The loans are secured on property owned by the school and are for a total period of up to 50 years.

“During the first three years, no repayments will be made but interest will accrue and then it will be repaid over the next 47 years.

“The interest rate applicable will be one per cent point above the 47 year Public Works Loan Board Annuity Rate.”

The Public Works Loan Board provides loans to local authorities for capital projects – usually in the form of regeneration projects such as Victoria Square or Sheerwater.

The UK Debt Management website reads: “Decisions over which capital projects to pursue and whether to borrow for

these investments are the responsibility of the elected council of each local authority, who are accountable to their electorates.

“Local authorities are free to borrow so long as the finance director is satisfied that they are acting in line with statute and can afford to repay the loan.

“The PWLB is a non-discretionary lender: it does not ask the purpose of a loan, as this would duplicate the decision-making structures of the individual local authorities.”

The Grant Thornton report could be ready for release by the end of this month.

Greenfield School Woking (image Google)

Epsom’s neighbour cracks on with its Local Plan

18 December 2024



More than 6,000 new homes will be built in the Surrey borough of Mole Valley, with Leatherhead taking on the largest share after the district council approved its long-term planning bible.

Mole Valley District Council has agreed to build an average of 336 homes a year between 2020 and 2039 with town centre sites in Leatherhead, such as Bull Hill, and Dorking being set aside for large scale housing-led redevelopment.

Office complexes in Ashstead and Dorking have also been earmarked for regeneration, and green belt land in Ashstead, Bookham, Dorking and Leatherhead released so developers can build homes.

The council has also agreed to hand over green belt land for housing within and around Hookwood to “complement” economic growth near Gatwick.

Villages within the green belt, namely Beare Green, Brockham, Capel, Charlwood, and Westcott will have their boundaries amended to allow “appropriate development” after Mole Valley District Council formally adopted its local plan last week (October 15).

In all, Leatherhead is expected to take on 30 per cent of the new homes (1,914), followed by the areas around Dorking 23 per cent (1,467), Hookwood, 15 per cent (957), Ashtead, 11 per cent (701) and Bookham, seven per cent (446).

The remaining 14 per cent (893) will be spread across the rest of the district.

In Leatherhead the council wants to create what it calls, a Riverside Quarter, at Claire House and James House in Bridge Street. This would go alongside an Urban Quarter at the redevelopment of the Bull Hill.

For Dorking, the Pippbrook House refurbishment remains its flagship development as well as plans to redevelop the Foundry Museum and Church Street workshops.

More locally, housing requirements for neighbourhood areas are as follows:

- Ashtead - 652 net new dwellings
- Bookham - 513 net new dwellings
- Capel Parish - 198 net new dwellings
- Ockley Parish - 135 net new dwellings
- Westcott - 123 net new dwellings

Mole Valley District Council, which passed its local plan by 28 votes to five with one abstention, said that 40 per cent of all new units would be affordable, and all come with at least one EV charging point.

The meeting heard that about 76 per cent of Mole Valley land was designated as Metropolitan Green Belt and protected from most forms of development.

Under its new plan, it said it has been able to deliver sites for housing while relinquishing less than one per cent of that.

Had the local plan not been agreed, developers would have had carte blanche to build without restrictions.

Cllr Margaret Cooksey, portfolio holder for planning on the Liberal Democrat run council, said: “It gives me enormous pleasure to be able to bring the local plan to this council for adoption at last.

“The local plan is about much more than a document about meeting housing need but a good deal of time and effort is taken up by worrying about specific development sites, particularly green belt sites,

“It’s worth noting again that only 0.65 per cent of the existing green belt in the district has been identified to be released for future development.

“There are sites in most of our wards that we wish were not there however I did say, that I felt that it was a fair plan in as much as what could be seen as pain was spread as evenly as possible across the district.”

Local plans go through long drawn-out processes before they are formally adopted, requiring sign off from planning inspectors.

Councils need to identify land for development and demonstrate it can meet housing targets. Often there is a trade off between town centre intensification or protecting green belt.

As well as the housing, the Mole Valley plan creates 230 new locally listed buildings and grants 27 parks and open spaces extra protection.

Dissenting voices in the chamber felt the council could have gone further to limit the impact on green belt while Cllr Chris Hunt (Independent, Ashted Lanes and Common) said more could be done to curb building heights to stop town’s from becoming the next Woking.

He told the meeting: “This is not a sugar coated pill for us to take, it’s got some very good things, affordable housing, the commitment for better health and education facilities, those are very positive things.

“But it’s also got some really hard to agree things.

He added: “There is still quite a lot of uncertainty about whether a key site in our key town of Leatherhead can actually be developed or not.”

Adding: “It’s effectively saying that the plan’s foundations are uncertain in that regard and unfortunately it does echo something else, that there are no clearly defined density agreements.

“It has lots of good things but if I was on Strictly [Come Dancing] it would not be 10 out of 10, it would be a seven.”

Cllr Cooksey said: “We’re not Woking, Mole Valley is not Woking and we don’t want to look like Woking but there’s the dilemma between do we build in the green belt (or in the towns?)”

Cllr Leah Mursaleen-Plank (Liberal Democrat, Mickleham, Westcott and Okewood) said her ward has been hit by uncontrolled development “again and again” and called out at those asking to delay the plan’s adoption in order to protect more green belt.

She said: “There is no alternative here.

“We have been in a position in my ward where we haven’t had a local plan and we’ve had uncontrolled developments going through over and over again.

“We’re losing green belt by delaying further.

“To say that we need more time just means more development on green belt sites, the opposite of what you would like to achieve.”

Summing up Cllr Cooksey said: “I’m disappointed that we can’t say that it’s the overwhelming view of the whole council, it would have been very much stronger if we could have had support from the whole chamber.

‘However we have an excellent plan here, I truly believe it and really think it’s probably the best we could probably have come up with under all the circumstances that we’ve had to deal with over the years.’

Mole Valley covers 25,832 hectares, 16 per cent of Surrey as a whole and is the third largest borough in the county.

Its population of 87,245 accounts for seven per cent of Surrey’s total, while the average house price of £505,000 makes it second most expensive district in the county.

The ratio of house prices to residents’ salaries was 14:1 in March 2020, the fifth most unaffordable district in Surrey.

Between 2014 and 2019, 1,265 new homes were completed in Mole Valley - 230 of which were affordable.

Related reports:

Mole Valley ‘won’t bend’ to petitioners

Mole Valley Plan Paused

Artistic Impression Of The Arrival Square from North Street, south east corner. (Credit: Mole Valley District Council and Keir Property)

Only the cashless will be “on the Hook” Road car park Epsom

18 December 2024



A town centre car park is set to go cashless after plans to upgrade its ticket machines were approved.

Pay metres at the Hook Road multi-storey car park in Epsom are nearing the end of their functioning life-span and need to be replaced.

The problem facing Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is that any new pay-and-display machines at the site only have a limited lifespan as the car park is earmarked for redevelopment - which could begin as soon as September 2025.

Redeveloping the car park will not be a straightforward job however as it was built directly on a historic coal and gas manufacturing site, dating from the 1870s.

A report presented to the council's environment committee in July read: "Gas works are some of the most contaminated sites in the UK with the council's car park situated above a concrete capped former tar pit.

"Tar pits have a very high level of contamination, and it is possible that the car park caps are the most contaminated part of the wider gas works site.

"The car park was built in the mid-1980s when it was environmentally acceptable to concrete over former contaminated land uses."

Earlier this year the council announced it had entered into an agreement with the developers of the SGN Gas Works next door as part of its long-standing ambition to build a new town centre.

The combined sites are part the council's masterplan for Epsom, and features in its draft Local Plan -which sets out where, and the type, of development that will take place in the borough.

Until then, however, the car park will remain in use - and moves to replace its worn out machines are now underway.

Those who are unwilling to go cashless, or cannot, have been advised to park elsewhere, with Depot Road and the high street named as the most likely alternatives.

Councillor **Liz Frost**, (RA Woodcote and Langley) chair of the Environment Committee, said: "The current barrier control payment scheme for the car park is at the end of their life and needs to be replaced and the life of this car park is limited."

The committee had at one stage planned to spend £20,000 on a like-for-like replacement but this was thrown out and the new cheaper alternative agreed.

In 2023/24 the council made £60,000 from the car park - far below the £137,000 it had budgeted for and less than the £65,000 it costs to run and maintain.

The council's October environment committee heard that many of those using the car park were season ticket holders and would not need the new system. Of those who do , 81 per cent already pay by card.

Ringo, which was selected to replace the pay-and-display machines, adds a 20p 'convenience charge' to each transaction. The committee said it would look at parking charges, and whether to pass the full increase on to motorists, at a later date.

Related report:

[Epsom and Ewell Council answers parking complaint immediately](#)

[Hook Road Car Park, Epsom \(Image Google\)](#)

Mole Valley 'won't bend' to petitioners

18 December 2024



The fight to protect the green gateway into a Leatherhead goes on after campaigners seeking to stop a popular park from being turned into high rises were told the council would not “bend the knee” to their petition.

Mole Valley District Council heard from residents representing the 1,500 people who joined the call to stop the “unnecessary” development at Leatherhead’s Red House Park by Bull Hill.

They argued the open space could be saved if the council instead redeveloped the raft of empty offices or unused industrial estates in the town.

The petition, discussed at the Tuesday, October 15 full meeting of Mole Valley District Council read: “This park is used by many people and also home to lots of wildlife and historical trees.

“The plans are to build high rise flats and apartments which would look unsightly. The town has barely enough space in schools, and doctors and dentists have waiting lists so understandably very concerning for local residents.”

The plan, part of Transform Leatherhead, seeks to redevelop the land within the existing one-way system known as Bull Hill, including the Red House Gardens.

The council and its development partner Kier say this is to complement the retail and leisure quarters of the town.

Bull Hill is currently made up of office space, public car parks and open space.

It was originally earmarked for retail but after work to the Swan Centre and transport studies, as well as the trend away from high street shopping, the decision was made to go for a mixed development.

In October 2023 the council and Kier Property signed the legal agreements and the joint venture is now working to develop the project.

Presenting the petition, the speaker said: “If we destroy everything that makes Leatherhead a destination in favour of becoming a carbon copy of London then people will leave.”

Campaigners pressed for the use of alternative sites and said there was 140,000 square metres of empty office space in Leatherhead – enough for 190 two-bed family homes.

However this was quickly shot down as they were told the council was powerless to force private landowners to hand over vacant properties -and were restricted to sites identified in its local plan.

Instead they want the campaigners to work with the council to make the site the best it can be for the town – while understanding the council needs to build on the land to hit its housing targets.

Cabinet member Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (Liberal Democrat; Leatherhead North) praised the strength of feeling but said the council can only put forward sites their owners put forward for development.

She said the new local plan has put in restrictions and that developments with high rise buildings have to prove their worth, and that play and open spaces must be provided.

The council also expected the redevelopment to increase biodiversity in the town by at least 20 per cent.

Cllr Vyvyan-Robinson told the meeting she hoped residents would continue to be involved in the process as the plans continued to be revised.

Cllr Ben Wall (Liberal Democrat; Leatherhead North) dismissed fears the project would turn the town into the next Woking or Croydon. He said: “The tallest building in Croydon is 150metres tall, you can see that for miles, we’re suggesting a building that’s maximum 20m, you are not going to see it from Leatherhead North.

He added: “We’ve been talking about this for the best part of a decade, we’ve had countless opportunities for residents to talk to us. We are listening. Listening is not the same things as bending the knee entirely to a petition. We will listen to a petition, it doesn’t mean we have to come to the same conclusion as a petition.

“Leatherhead has suffered from a chronic lack of investment for decades it’s not the time to start throwing out multimillion investment and investment opportunities without fully assessing their potential benefits.

“I’m cautiously optimistic that these proposals incorporating public feedback can be successful.

“I’m not saying that we will come to a perfect solution but we can not let perfect be the enemy of good.”

Cabinet member Cllr Claire Malcolmson (Liberal Democrat; Holmwoods and Beare Green) added: “ We are listening these are not the final designs.”

Some Surrey boroughs get brownfield funding

18 December 2024



Surrey councils will get nearly £2m to release disused brownfield sites to unlock desperately needed land for house building including cash to clear asbestos and transform the “heart of Camberley”.

Boroughs and districts are bracing themselves for tough new Government housing targets that could see the demands to deliver new homes skyrocket.

In an effort to alleviate some of the pressures the Government has announced £68m of funding is to go directly to 54 local authorities to turn what it describes as neglected land into housing.

Two of those councils are in Surrey; Surrey Heath Borough Council is set to receive £1,480,300, with Tandridge District Council in line for £250,159.

The funding is to be used clearing empty buildings, former car parks or industrial land in order to make way for homes.

Historically it is expensive to get such sites ready for housebuilding and can sit as empty eyesores for years.

Surrey Heath Borough Council has said in a statement the funding will support its new housing development in London Road site, “near the A30 in the heart of Camberley”.

It added: “The grant will be used to demolish derelict buildings on the site and safely remove asbestos from the former Allders building, clearing the way for future development. “

The money is part of a three-year £180 million Brownfield Land Release Fund 2 launched in July 2022 to allow local authorities in England to build on blocked brownfield land.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer said: “From the outset we promised to get this country building again to deliver 1.5 million homes over this parliament and help tackle the housing crisis we have inherited. That is the essence of fixing the foundations and driving growth.

“I said this government is on the side of the builders, not the blockers. And I meant it. This funding for councils will see disused sites and industrial wastelands transformed into thousands of new homes in places that people want to live and work. Our brownfield-first approach will not only ramp up housebuilding but also create more jobs, deliver much-needed infrastructure, and boost economic growth across the country.

“This government is rolling up its sleeves and delivering the change the British people deserve.”

Housing and planning minister Matthew Pennycook said: “The government is committed to a brownfield-first approach to housebuilding, and we have already taken steps to prioritise and fast-track building on previously used urban land through our proposals for a ‘brownfield passport’.

“The funding announced today will support the delivery of thousands of new homes and boost economic growth by unlocking development on scores of abandoned, disused and neglected urban sites across the country.”

Releasing brownfield land is one step in meeting the needs for housing but some councils are calling on the government to do more.

Waverley Borough Council has written to the deputy prime minister Angela Rayner over the government’s wider planning reforms, which currently would require the council to deliver 1,379 homes a year - a figure that borough leader Councillor Paul Follows called “unrealistic” and “unachievable”.

He added: “The proposed standard method is fundamentally detached from the realities of local constraints, including national designations such as the Surrey Hills National Landscape. It risks undermining both the environment and community cohesion, and we urgently need a more credible, locally tailored approach.”

Further concerns were raised over the role of developers in housing delivery.

Planning authorities such as Waverley have no control over the rate of housing completions.

The Allders building in Camberley will have asbestos cleared to make it suitable for housing (image Google)

Surrey Tories bouncing back already?

18 December 2024



The Conservative election turnaround in Surrey shows no sign of slowing after the party beat the Liberal Democrats, Labour and independents to take two more seats at the October 2024 by-elections.

Voters in Elmbridge backed the Tories in both seats contested on Thursday, October 10 - holding on to Weybridge and winning Hersham Village.

The polls were called following the death of former Conservative councillor and "community champion" Charu Sood, who died after a cancer battle in August, and the resignation of Chester Chandler.

The two victories build on other Tory wins in Surrey with the party winning in Waverley Borough Council following a huge 19 per cent swing and victory in Runnymede where they doubled Labour's vote share.

The wins have left the Conservative group leader on Elmbridge Borough Council in buoyant mood and talking up the possibility of going into coalition with the residents groups to offer "a better approach".

Councillor John Cop said: "We're back, after a couple of difficult years it's amazing to see the council group grow again.

"I think it was a combination of two factors.

"Firstly there was a very clear rejection on the door of what the Liberal Democrat council has done.

"The Hersham community has been treated really poorly.

"There's been the closure of the community centres, still not fully reopen and there was a lot of concern around high rise buildings going up on the town centre - and the council not getting a local plan in place leaving us open to development.

"Secondly. there was a real anger at the new Labour government, winter fuel coming in, and talking down the economy, I think that was why we saw such a dramatic turnaround."

Elections in Elmbridge take place every year, with the fourth year left free for the county council ballot.

The Conservatives had not won in Hersham since 2021. Cllr Cope put the reversal in fortune down to the popularity of their candidate whom he dubbed "Mr Hersham" '.

In Weybridge, the party held on to narrowly hold the seat, in what was their first victory there since 2022.

The new council now comprises 21 Liberal Democrats, easily the largest party, 13 Residents Associations Group members, 11 Conservatives, two Hinchley Wood RAG and one independent.

It leaves the door open for a change of control at the top should the residents associations go into coalition with the Conservatives, something Cllr Cope said he would look to do.

Cllr Cope said: "We would welcome going into coalition with the residents associations and change the council for the better.

"I would be more than happy to talk to the residents' associations to see if they would prefer a different approach."

Weybridge St Georges Hill results in full

- Colin McFarlane: Conservative Party 608 votes, 46.0 per cent (Elected)
- Andrew Kelly: Weybridge and St George's Independents 598 votes, 45.2 per cent
- Brittany Johansson, Green Party, 116 votes 8.8 per cent

Turnout 19.7 per cent

Hersham Village

- John O'Reilly. Conservative Party 1029 votes 55.4 per cent (Elected)
- Vasha Khodiyar, Liberal Democrats 736 votes 39.6 per cent
- Francis Eldergill. Labour Party 94 votes 5.1 per cent

Turnout 27.1 per cent

Newly elected Elmbridge Borough Councillor Colin McFarlane and John O'Reilly (image John Cope)

Fly-tippers force closure of Surrey recycling centre

18 December 2024



A Surrey recycling site will permanently close due to persistent fly-tipping at the site.

The Mound car park in Tattenham Corner has been repeatedly hit by high levels of dumped rubbish, despite CCTV cameras being installed at the site Reigate and Banstead Borough Council has said.

The centre's final day will be October 17.

Councillor Hannah Avery, executive member for neighbourhood services said: "When fly-tipping at one of our recycling sites blights the local area and prevents us from recycling all the waste that we can, it is doing more harm than good.

"It reduces the environmental benefits, increases the financial costs of waste disposal and takes our Cleansing team away from other work to keep the borough clean.

"I want to thank the majority of residents who are recycling their waste responsibly and especially those that are going the extra mile to arrange local clean ups.

"I want it to be easy for Reigate and Banstead residents to recycle as much of their household waste as possible, but I also want them to be confident that their recycling gets recycled properly and has a positive environmental impact."

All collection bins with the exception of the clothes banks will be removed with the vacant space turned over for car parking.

According to the council, its recycling sites can be magnets for large amounts of non-recyclable fly-tipped rubbish - a quarter of all reported tips last year were at the Tattenham Corner site.

Overall the council says it clears 300 van-loads of dumped waste from The Mound each year.

A spokesperson for the council said that in an effort to stem the flow they used mobile CCTV and issued 16 fixed penalties for fly-tipping and a further 12 for littering at the site so far this year since, while in March new signs informed visitors that ongoing misuse could lead to the facility being closed without further notice.

It did not reduce the number of fly-tips - including from both commercial and trade waste.

The spokesperson added: "The council estimates around 70 per cent of the dumped waste is made up of items that cannot be recycled, which contaminates the recyclable waste that people are disposing of responsibly.

"As a result, the Tattenham Corner recycling site, which is on Royal Drive, will close permanently on Thursday. October 17.

"The Mound car park will close for one day on October 21 to allow for the creation of additional car parking spaces."

Image: Royal Drive Tattenham Corner Fly-tipping (RBBC)