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Box Hill keeps its pie and mash

13 March 2025

The iconic Surrey Hills will keep its classic English pie and mash shop after plans were approved for the takeaway in Box Hill. Posha's Pie and Mash Shop, in the rural Box Hill Road, Tadworth, was given the go-ahead at the second time of asking despite traffic officers again recommending its refusal. Surrey Highways said in January that the shop should be refused permission over concerns of cars reversing onto the main road, and the application was deferred to allow the owners to make the needed changes.

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

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

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

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

Image – Credit Google Street view May 2023 the business's food van

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Could Woking's debt be shared by you after reorganisation?

13 March 2025

Chris Caulfield of the BBC's Local Democracy Service brings us the latest twist in the awful Woking Borough Council debt crisis. Its £2.1 billion debt accumulated under a Conservative administration from unwise property dealings. The Labour Government is driving forward a reorganisation of Surrey's local government and there is anxiety that Woking's debt will be spread to a wider Council tax payer base as a result. Could Epsom and Ewell householders end up paying for the mistakes of Councillors they did not elect?

Even if bankrupt Woking Borough Council sold everything it owned, it would still be more than **£1.5 billion in debt**. The huge figure was published as part of the ongoing reports Government commissioners must produce on the broken borough as it goes through the painful process of rebalancing its books.

The report stated that while the council, which declared itself bust in 2023 following a disastrous regeneration program that saddled residents with huge tax rises and massive service cuts, was taking steps to sell off its assets, the level of debt was still such that it needed significant government support. Published on March 6, the report revealed that the council had a core spending power of £16.9 million a year – but servicing its £2.1 billion debt was costing £1.3 million a week in interest alone.

"Even if everything else could be disposed of, the level of overhanging debt would still be significant, over £1.5 billion, as the level of debt far exceeds the value of assets," the report stated. It added that some assets, such as the council's social housing valued at £400 million, had to be retained. However, if the council did nothing, the annual interest costs and loan servicing would average £70 million and £73 million a year respectively, "which would add significantly to the level of debt."

The council was granted Exceptional Financial Support for the next two years, allowing it to cover interest and other revenue costs. However, the commissioners warned: "With no ability to repay the exceptional financial support through asset sales, let alone all the legacy debt, the position is not sustainable. Work is underway to determine the best exit strategy from the commercial legacy, which we are engaging with government on, and it is recognised that a long-term financial solution will not be in place for the 2025/26 budget process. However, the current position is not viable, and commissioners are keen to continue engaging with government on the route forward."

Responding on behalf of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage acknowledged the bleak situation but stated that the department was reassured Woking Borough Council was committed to radically overhauling its operations. Serious concerns remained over the task ahead and the potential impact on the impending reorganisation of local government – the dissolution of Surrey's boroughs, districts, and county council, to be replaced with either two or three larger unitary bodies with an elected mayor.

Baroness Taylor wrote: "I share your concerns about the capacity of the council to deliver this programme of change and encourage you to work with the council and the ministry to consider how we can best enable the council to improve, for the benefit of residents. We have been clear with councils in Surrey that commissioners have a vital role, not only in supporting Woking to continue to improve but also in responding to the invitation to all principal authorities in Surrey to provide proposals for local government reorganisation, to ensure that proposals are robust."

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Another Surrey Borough under financial strain

13 March 2025

"Hard" times are coming to Surrey Heath Borough Council residents as millions of pounds are being cut from services, with many reduced to minimum standards, as its bleak financial situation became clear. The borough is saddled with high debt repayments to cover the cost of loans it borrowed to finance and purchase Camberley Square and the House of Fraser. The costs of servicing the debt are said to be almost as much as the council brings in through tax.

Plans to sell the town hall for housing and move into the House of Fraser building have also been put on ice due to the imminent restructuring of local government and the likely abolition of borough and district councils. It leaves the council having to rely on rapidly depleting reserves while it guts services to residents – or face going bust.

At the February 19 full meeting of Surrey Heath Borough Council, members agreed to make cuts of £2.143 million in 'transformation savings' while drawing down £21.67 million from earmarked reserves. This comes after years of uncertainty over the council's finances – which have finally been audited for the first time since 2019.

The budget papers read: "The council now has a greater understanding of its level of reserves, the figures contained within its base budget and the overall size of the deficit. This is not a palatable situation and requires some significant transformational savings, efficiencies and additional income generation just to remain solvent over the period covered by this Medium-Term Financial Strategy (the next four years). Over the previous budgets, the council has applied some of its reserve balances to support regeneration and continued delivery of services to the local residents and businesses; however…this is not sustainable in perpetuity. Previous years have seen an annual base budget review exercise which generated £2.1 million overall savings to the council. These have not been sufficient to bridge the budget gap and have only succeeded in 'buying more time' on reserve usage; the council is now embarking on a council-wide transformation programme."

This includes a full review of all discretionary services and a restructuring of what it provides to residents. The report read: "The desired outcome of reducing the cost of delivery through reduction in the non-statutory element level of service, ensuring compliance with only the minimum statutory requirement and ensuring appropriate cost recovery in the discretionary chargeable services offered." There will also be a full review of the staffing structure as this makes up the majority of controllable costs of services.

The council has also said it would look to sell off assets and has identified some that could be disposed of. However, its two largest assets, and the ones that are primarily the root cause of much of the council's financial problems, are now worth significantly less than what Surrey Heath paid. Selling these would result in huge losses.

Councillor Shaun Macdonald, leader of Surrey Heath Borough Council, said: "As expected, the view is not pretty. We are now clear that the numbers we inherited were fundamentally misstated, with the reserves being confirmed as £16m lower. That's about a third of a haircut versus the total. Therefore, our ability to provide the same services to residents that they've been used to is nonexistent."

He told the meeting: "Putting the properties to one side, our core income is about £13m and our core cost of services is roughly £15.8m. It does not take an accountant to understand that's a difference of £2.8m a year – and that is before net indirect costs of roughly £5.3m, which is predominantly made of interest and debt repayments – less property income – to pay for the reckless purchases made in 2016 and which will remain a significant number for future generations. So what are our choices to address this longer term? Well, there are only two options: reduce costs and increase income further.

"Our ability to increase income is extremely limited, therefore the budget increases council tax by the permitted maximum of 2.99 per cent." He said the maximum contribution must come through cost-cutting, through efficiencies, and through transformational change.

He added: "This is easier said than done. Not least with the cost of change to factor in. We simply have to stop doing things that we do today if it can't pay its way or it's not a statutory service, and that is hard. It's hard for us collectively in this chamber, it's hard for the officers who work very hard to provide our services, to provide our residents with the best services they can. It's hard for our residents who are used to having what they've had as a service or the support that they've been given through grants."

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13 March 2025

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Current Front Page

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Critical front-line services will be spared after a huge government ‘bail out’ was agreed, bankrupt Woking Borough Council has said. Officially referred to as Exceptional Financial Support for local authorities, Woking Borough Council has been given £74.9 million for the 2025/26 financial year on top of the £96.5million agreed for 24/25.

Woking declared itself effectively bust in 2023 with debts of about £2 billion. It forced the council to cut new spending, axe non-statuary services and increase tax by 10 per cent.

It used the money to build up what it hoped would be a significant investment portfolio but instead saddled itself with huge debt repayments costing tens of millions of pounds every year that it simply can not afford.

It has left the council relying on the Government to cover the cost of its heavy borrowing, known as minimum debt repayment. And this week came the news that it would receive all the money it has asked for – including a further £ 2.8million to cover the cost of providing services this year.

Had the Government refused completely the council would have ground to a halt. Councils also have to, by law, balance their books each year, and the £2.8m above and beyond debt repayment was agreed as it was viewed that Woking Borough Council has been doing what it can to reduce its spending.

This has included mass layoffs, the sale of assets, and finding partners to take over the running of others. Had any further cuts been made in such a short period of time, the results would have been ‘catastrophic’ to both the council and residents it had been said.

The government cash comes as part of 30 councils overall that have been given support to manage financial pressures – such is the widespread problem of local government finance.

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Leader of Woking Borough Council, said: “I welcome the Government’s decision to provide exceptional financial support. Critically, this will ensure that the council can meet its financial obligations relating to its £2.1 billion legacy debt without impacting front-line services and will allow us to set a balanced budget at a meeting of Council on Monday 3 March.

“We continue to urgently address the council’s legacy debt through work being undertaken as part of our Improvement and Recovery Plan on asset rationalisation, debt reduction and improved commercial governance.

“We remain committed to working alongside Commissions and Government to find a lasting resolution to our complex and challenging financial situation.”

In January 2023, an external assurance review covering Woking Borough Council’s governance, finance and commercial issues was carried out. It provided an external assessment of Woking Borough Council’s governance arrangements, financial situation, commercial investments and its capacity and capability to manage these.

The Secretary of State was not satisfied that the pace or scale of the council’s response was proportionate to the issues it faced and decided immediate urgent government action was required, – and On May 25, 2023, he decided to intervene and appointed the review team as commissioners.

By June that year the council declared itself bankrupt and by October, the Commissioners spoke of the gravity of the situation in Woking and the scale of the challenge the council faced.

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Ex-Council Officers under investigation for Woking’s £2 billion debt

No wonder Woking went bankrupt. Scandal of private school loans

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Poundland saving itself pennies in Elmbridge

13 March 2025

Poundland has been told to “show some local pride” and repair its broken shop front window and remove the graffiti from its East Molesey store.

The low-price chain, which serves up to seven million customers every week natonwide, has been issued with a community protection warning by Elmbridge Borough Council after ignoring multiple requests to address the eyesores.

Elmbridge Borough Council says it works with business groups and community volunteers to keep its high streets, villages and parades thriving and to bring that sense of civic pride.

One group, from Manor Road, takes care of the planters along Walton Road to “lift up the high street”.

Initiatives in the last year have been designed to make a positive impact on the community, such as new bins, flower planters, deep cleans and pavement works.

It’s part of a move to get businesses, volunteers and the council working together in support of the borough’s high streets.

That work has been undermined for “almost a year” as Poundland left temporary wooden panelling and unsightly graffiti, in place.

A spokesman for Elmbridge Borough Council said: “Despite multiple requests to address the graffiti and damage at Poundland in East Molesey, sufficient action has not been taken.

“The store has tried to clean the windows professionally but could not get the graffiti removed.

“In support of local residents, we have issued this Community Protection Warning hoping that Poundland will now undertake the necessary repairs and support our high streets.”

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Under Community Protection Warnings, £100 fines can be issued in the first instance. If no action is taken, prosecutions can begin. If convicted the maximum penalty is a fine up to £20,000.

Councillor Steve Bax (Conservative: Molesey East) said: “Almost a year has gone by without action and they are giving the impression they are not bothered as long as the money continues to roll in.

“When we have got Manor Road residents caring for the planters so brilliantly and doing their best to lift up the high street, we need this retailer to show some local pride too.

“The council has issued a community protection warning against Poundland which gives the company 28 days to fix the shop front or face a fine.

“Hopefully this formal action will now mean the company move forward and deal with shopfront issues.”

Poundland was approached for comment.

Ex-Council Officers under investigation for Woking’s £2 billion debt

13 March 2025

Two former officers at Woking Borough Council are being investigated over their roles in Woking Borough Council’s bankruptcy. The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has confirmed that it is looking into the “professional standards” of two “individual accountants” in respect of Woking Borough Council’s operations and investment activities for the financial years ended 31 March 2017 to 31 March 2023.

While the FRC has not identified the two people involved, former CEO Ray Morgan has confirmed to the Local Democracy Reporting Service he is being investigated. The Guardian has named the other as Leigh Clarke, who was the council’s chief financial officer until 2023. Shortly after her departure the council’s interim section 151 officer declared Woking bankrupt with debts of more than £2 billion.

Since then the council has had to cut huge numbers of jobs, increased its share of tax by 10 per cent and slashed funding to services and facilities. It is the second time the FRC has investigated council officers. In January 2024 it began an investigation into a former member at Thurrock Council after that authority admitted to a £469m budget black hole.

If that is any indication of timescales, it could easily be more than a year before a decision is reached in Woking. FRC sanctioning powers range from issuing unlimited fines down to a slap on the wrist. It can also strip people of their membership of professional bodies.

Both Ray Morgan and Leigh Clarke were named in the Grant Thornton report published on Tuesday, November 5 that examined the scale of Woking’s borrowing. The report found a “long and atypical history of borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board” ran between 1999 and 2020.

Borrowing accelerated rapidly between 2016 and 2019 – primarily to fund regeneration projects such as Victoria Place and Sheerwater but also to cover running costs at its companies as well as loans to a private school. The Grant Thornton report read: “There was a strong message, over a period of many years, from the former CEO, Ray Morgan, that if debt could be serviced it was possible to borrow as much as the council wished, for whatever purposes it chose.”

Will Forster said: “As Woking’s MP, I’ve called for those who effectively bankrupted our local council to be held to account. Pleased to see that the Financial Reporting Council, the UK’s accounting watchdog, is investigating Ray Morgan and Leigh Clarke, two former senior council figures.”

Responding to the news, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Leader of Woking Borough Council, said: “Since the council fully accepted the recommendations of the independent Grant Thornton public interest report, Government-appointed commissioners overseeing Woking Borough Council’s financial recovery have been liaising with relevant professional bodies.

“As a result, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has confirmed investigations into the conduct of two former employees.

“Woking residents deserve complete transparency and for those responsible for the borough’s financial issues to be held accountable. We will therefore do whatever we can to assist the FRC in their investigations.”

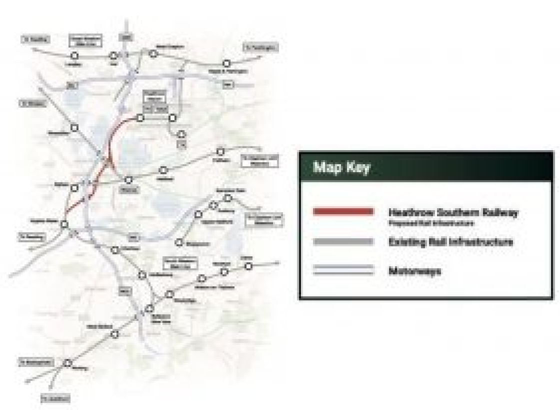
The FRC statement read: “This press notice concerns the opening of an investigation into the relevant individuals. The investigation does not relate to any persons or entities other than the relevant individuals and it would not be fair to treat any part of this announcement as constituting or evidencing an investigation into any other persons or entities.

“The Financial Reporting Council has commenced an investigation under the Accountancy Scheme into the conduct of two individual accountants in relation to their compliance with governance, reporting, regulations and professional standards in respect of Woking Borough Council’s operations and investment activities for the financial years ended 31 March 2017 to 31 March 2023.

“The individuals are no longer employed by the council. The decision was made at a meeting of the FRC’s conduct committee on 17 December 2024. The investigation will be conducted by the FRC’s executive counsel.”

Surrey’s new rail link to Heathrow?

13 March 2025



Plans for a new railway connecting Surrey to Heathrow and beyond have resurfaced as the track’s backers welcomed government support for a third runway at the airport. The line, called the Heathrow Southern Railway (HSR), is a privately financed proposal to link towns in Surrey to one of the world’s busiest airports.

If built, it would operate between Heathrow and London Waterloo via Staines. There would also be direct trains from the airport to Woking and Guildford, before carrying on to the south coast. Heathrow Southern Railway said it also would provide for an extension of the Elizabeth Line to Staines.

Baroness Jo Valentine, the group’s chairperson, said: “The UK Government has set a bold agenda for growth with its support for a third runway at Heathrow

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Airport. Our railway enhances that growth by increasing connectivity and reducing surface emissions. These benefits accrue with a two runway airport but will be enhanced with an additional runway. We look forward to working with all partners to make this a reality."

Mark Livock, chief executive, added: "The new Government has expressed interest in finding ways to harness private sector finance in making the delivery of major infrastructure schemes more affordable. Heathrow Southern Railway has a depth of experience in creating opportunities for private investment that could deliver tangible benefits to the UK, and southern rail access to Heathrow would positively transform public transport connectivity to Europe's busiest airport."

The group estimates that the new route would cut about millions of road journeys – with many of those from the M25. They added: "Our construction plans minimise the impact on neighbouring communities by providing a route mainly in tunnel and using only electric trains. Unlike the previous "Airtrack" proposals, HSR avoids level crossings in the Egham area."

An HSR spokesperson said: "Our proposed route starts at Heathrow's Terminal 5 station and is intended to run mainly in tunnel and be electrified to minimise environmental impact. It rises to the surface to connect to the existing railway near Staines and Virginia Water."

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"Blocks away" from airport expansions

Hsr Proposed Route (Image Heathrow Southern Rail)

Mole Valley setting a green belt development trend?

13 March 2025

Up to 200 new homes will be built on former green belt land despite fears they could overwhelm the already strained sewage system. Mole Valley District Council's planning committee approved developer Thakeham's vision for the 27-hectare site off Little Bookham Street on Wednesday, February 5. As well as the 200 homes, the plans will feature a community building, Gypsy and Traveller pitches, and public open space that the developers said would also open access to nearby ponds. Forty per cent of the homes would be affordable.

The site has been identified for development by the council's local plan, but the application had drawn more than 300 objections. Residents speaking at the meeting raised concerns about raw sewage, as well as the impact on local children being pushed out of their school's catchment area. Thames Water, however, raised no objections. Christine Milstead said: "Our green belt is definitely not Angela Rayner's gray belt. We think this development will cause harm to the green belt and protected habitats. All residents have objected to surface water flooding, and there are springs all over this site. For years, residents have been pumping water off their patios to prevent their houses from flooding. When you get a lot of rain, water does not drain through permeable surfaces. Will the proposed infrastructure capture water from the rear of new properties, or will it just run down to Little Bookham Street?"

Speaking on behalf of the plans, Tristan Robinson, Thakeham's director of external affairs, said Mole Valley was the fourth least affordable place to live in the country. He highlighted young couples struggling to afford housing and the 680 households on the waiting list. Despite the plans being voted through—by eight in favour, three against, and one abstention—Councillor Joanna Slater (Conservative; Leatherhead South) cautioned against setting a precedent for developing beyond what was laid out in the council's local plan for green belt. Cllr Paul Kennedy (Liberal Democrats: Bookham East and Eastwick Park) also urged the committee to heed residents and environmental groups calling for the protection of the "precious unspoiled countryside."

The new homes will be net carbon zero and feature a mix of one to four-bedroom properties. The developers aim to create 45 acres of open space and a new country park accessible to the wider community. Mr Robinson said: "After undertaking a comprehensive public consultation process for Land North West of Preston Farm, we are pleased to receive backing from Mole Valley District Council. The scheme includes 40 per cent affordable housing—something urgently needed locally—and significant new public open spaces for everyone to enjoy."

Plans for 200 homes in Little Bookham (image Thakeham)

Criminal car park QR codes wrong on many levels

13 March 2025

Fake QR codes, used to scam motorists into giving away their bank and card details, have been found in Guildford car parks.

The scam codes have been placed on payment machines, signs or barriers in an attempt to defraud people into thinking they are making genuine payments, Guildford Borough Council has warned.

Not only are the unsuspecting drivers handing over private details to the scammers but they are also putting themselves at risk of collecting a fine for not having a valid parking ticket.

The council has issued a warning to help people from getting caught out and said it does not use any QR codes at its car parks – so if you see one it's a scam.

Lead councillor for commercial services, Councillor Catherine Houston, said: "We are aware of the increase in QR code parking scams across the country and I want to reassure residents that our teams regularly inspect our car parks to keep them safe and free from fraudulent activities.

"Criminals are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their methods so if you do spot a QR code in one of our car parks, please don't scan it; report it to the council instead.

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"By raising awareness of such scams, we help to protect drivers from being misled so that residents and visitors can use our car parks in confidence."

Once scanned, the codes take people to a fake website that asks for credit and debit card information, mimicking genuine payment providers.

The council has now placed signs within all its car parks explaining to only use the RingGo app and to not use any QR codes found.

It has also pledged to remove any codes found with its enforcement team carrying out daily checks.

Scammers have targeted Guildford car parks (image Google)

Will Epsom and Ewell be bailing out Woking?

13 March 2025

Debt-ridden Woking Borough Council has approved the sale of two more assets as it continues slashing its way to a balanced budget.

The bankrupt authority, with debts of more than £2billion, is undergoing a full review of the buildings it owns as it's forced to sell them off to try to ease the burden on the taxpayer if and when a Government bailout happens.

The two most recent sell offs are the Egley Road Barn Site and Sheerwater Nursery. They are currently being used by the Woking Gymnastics Club and a charity.

Woking Borough Council went effectively bankrupt in 2023 on the back of a failed investment strategy to regenerate parts of the borough and has since had to raise its share of tax by 10 per cent, close a raft of public services including toilets, lose about 60 staff members and stop funding to community groups.

Borough leader Councillor Anne-Marie Barker told the Thursday January 16 executive committee: "It's part of our asset disposal program to help to reduce the debt at Woking Council."

The meeting heard that an earlier bid to sell Egley Road had fallen through but a second offer had since been accepted.

Councillor Dale Roberts said: "The purchaser progressed their offer in good faith but has ultimately withdrawn. The recommendation is to transact with the next highest bidder.

"The recommended purchaser, the new bidder, has submitted the highest financial offer on a conditional basis subject to planning."

Exact details of what this is, and the value of the bids, are still being kept private.

He added: "These decisions aren't purely economic, it's a key factor for this council of course as it's engaged in an asset disposal and debt reduction programme but it's not purely economic" and that the decision "also aligned with the Woking for all strategy".

He said: "It will help deliver a thriving community through partnerships."

Tenants Woking Gymnastics Club has been sent what the council calls a "letter of assurance" outlining what help the authority can provide going forward "in terms of balancing everyone's interest".

Cllr Roberts said: "We are doing everything we can though with Woking Gymnastics Club to facilitate their extension at the new site at Kingfield.

He added: "The disposal will facilitate the regeneration of the site.

"It will complement the existing development of residential land on the adjacent land holding and it will increase the provision of homes within the borough.

"It will also of course generate a capital receipt."

The Sheerwater site, in Blackmore Crescent, has been sold to a "special purchaser because advantages have been found for their ownership that would not be available to other buyers."

The two-storey community building, together with parking and a garden, does not currently provide the council with any rental income. It is being let to a charity that leases the entire site for free. The charity licences part of the building to a children's nursery with the income retained by the charity to support its operation.

The report into the sale read: "The authority recognises that this may require difficult decisions to be made as part of the wider transformation policy and an important priority for the council is to revise its approach to property ownership and to identify opportunities to raise both income and capital receipts from the disposal of surplus properties within the context of supporting current/future council expenditure/debt.