

# Doubtful Henry VIII would have permitted

22 May 2024



The decades-long planning battle to build almost 100 homes and a hotel opposite Hampton Court Palace will soon be decided with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport set to rule on the matter once and for all.

The government department is calling for new information and evidence over proposals from Network Rail Infrastructure and Alexpo to build 97 homes and an 84-bed hotel, together with shops and new access space around Hampton Court station in East Molesey.

The former Jolly Boatman site lies next to the River Thames and overlooks the palace. Elmbridge Borough Council originally rejected the plans but their decision was later overturned on appeal.

The original application received more than 1,800 objections and 131 letters of support and was refused due to “excessive height and bulk” and “harm to numerous heritage assets”.

Hampton Court Rescue Campaign (HCRC) argued it would spoil views across the river of Hampton Court Palace.

It is now in the hands of the Secretary of State because the law states developments within half a mile of the historic home of King Henry must be approved by the senior minister.

A spokesperson for HCRC wrote: “For over 100 years, Hampton Court Palace has benefited from the unique protection of the Act, which has successfully restricted developments over 50 ft in height in the environs of the Palace.

“In the Council’s Development Brief for the site there is a requirement that any scheme must categorically be below 50 feet.”

Permission was granted after the planning inspector ruled it would fit with the surroundings while the hotel, retail units and riverside restaurant would make life better for visitors.

Furthermore, the inspector said the plans would support the rest of the town.

People using the station, the inspector added, would have improved access to the bridge.

They said: “Taken together, these features of the design would result in a place that would be accessible and easy to move around.”

On height, the inspector said: “The distinctive treatment of the upper level, together with the depth and width of the podium gardens, would break up the mass of the built form.

“Whilst they would clearly be seen as part of a larger scheme, I do not think that they would be perceived as a single mass, either in views from the park or in longer views from the north bank of the River Thames.”

They added: “Some parties sought to criticise the design on the basis that it would not be sufficiently eye-catching or innovative.

“I agree that this is not a design that seeks to make an assertive architectural statement. However, in this case I do not regard that as a negative.

“I consider that the design would result in a calm, well-ordered scheme with sufficient presence to hold its own in the street scene.”

The consultation includes an open text box for people’s views and space to attach documents and is available via the department’s website or by searching Hampton Court consultation.

Image: Jolly Boatman development viewed from across River Thames. Credit Alexpo. Henry VIII clipart cactus cowboy

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## Not loving it in Cobham

22 May 2024



A proposed new McDonald's is "the last thing Surrey needs"; that's according to residents living near the proposed site.

The fast-food giant has published plans to takeover the former Loch Fyne restaurant in Portsmouth Road, Cobham, but some people living nearby are not loving it - and want it turned into a community hub instead.

The vacant Locally Listed Building has fallen into a state of disrepair with McDonald's saying a Cobham branch would "bring it back into active use as a restaurant to ensure its long-term viability."

While the village of Cobham was recently named one of the most affluent communities in Surrey, residents have said that the Northfield Estate, where the restaurant is proposed, is one the lowest socio-economic area in the county.

Residents said they were "concerned" over the impact a fast food restaurant could have on people's social, mental and emotional wellbeing - and have started a petition calling for a rethink.

"The area needs a community hub, promoting social, mental and emotional wellbeing for residents, McDonald's is the direct contrast of that," the petition read, adding ' the Northfield Estate is the lowest socio economic demographic in Cobham, and one of the lowest in Surrey.' The petition pointed to research which highlights a strong link between obesity and deprivation.

Burger giant has said it has received relatively balanced feedback with people welcoming new job opportunities

Other residents concerns include the site's proximity to schools and the number of students who would be passing it on a daily basis. Many of the 391 signatories fear the restaurant, which would have space for 60 diners and car parking for 33 vehicles, would have on a significant impact on what was already a traffic hotspot.

The Portsmouth Road site is near the roundabout and Sainsbury's petrol station, shortly before the road leads on to the A3. The petition says: "The Painshill roundabout is already extremely busy, with queues forming regularly to enter or leave Cobham; additionally it can be challenging to enter or leave the petrol station."

One person wrote: "The last thing Surrey needs is another McDonald's." Another added: "I feel a McDonald's would be detrimental to the village of Cobham."

Plans for the site, which would be the group's 15th branch in the county, are still in consultation stage ahead of being submitted to Elmbridge Borough Council for consideration.

McDonald's has said it would "sensitively restore" the disused site and create "at least 120 new jobs". The Cobham branch would also "address an identified demand". A spokesperson for McDonald's said: "We are encouraged that nearly 500 people have engaged with our consultation so far for a new McDonald's in Cobham.

"To date, we have received relatively balanced feedback in response to the proposals, with local people welcoming the creation of new job opportunities, the diversified food choice in Cobham and the sensitive restoration of the vacant and under-utilised site."

Image: harry\_nl CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 DEED

## Banded together to fight the band

22 May 2024

Band	2023/24	Increase	2024/25
A	£1,490	£70	£1,560
B	£1,739	£81	£1,820
C	£1,987	£92	£2,079
D	£2,235	£104	£2,339
E	£2,732	£127	£2,859
F	£3,229	£150	£3,379
G	£3,726	£173	£3,899
H	£4,471	£208	£4,679

A decades-long council tax battle has been won netting residents of a retirement village up to £9,000 each after it was ruled all 113 people there had been in the wrong rate band. Their victory means the former Band E and D homes have now been reclassified and moved down one level to Band D and C - with the rebate backdating back to 1993.

Those who have live at the Oaklands Park retirement village in Redhill, built in 1989, will also be saving about £500 a year

going forward at the former B and E homes. Marilyn Rodd, described as a “force of nature”, chairs the Oaklands Park Residents Association, and it was her refusal to give up that ultimately won the day. She said: “We’re just in disbelief really. It was a complete turnaround we didn’t expect it, we didn’t expect it to go back that far, its a huge result for income-limited pensioners, £500 a year in your council tax for couples. It’s disbelief and absolute joy and everyone is thrilled. There is happiness at Oaklands Park.”

The Redhill retirement village features 113 one or two-bed flats, bungalows, and houses. They were originally sold as top-of-the-range homes because, at the time, the concept of a retirement village was unusual. Their prices soon came crashing down as people sold and moved on – before finding their natural market value at significantly less than originally priced.

Four years after they were built the Government introduced Council Tax – where people are charged based on the value of their property. The Valuation Office Agency, responsible for setting council tax bands, looked at the prices the homes were originally sold, and their high bands have remained.

That ruling, which residents have been fighting against ever since, has meant the retirement community has been paying Band E and D rates for their small flats, bungalows and houses for years when they should not have been.

Mrs Rodd said: “We did it as a collective. It shows the power of banding together. It took a lot of research to understand how it works. It was doggedness and a lot of research and most of all it was getting everybody working together.”

From the start, they had the support of their MP and local council. Mrs Rodd said: “People move down from bigger houses and are shocked to find out its still band E. Every time someone moves in they query it. But we haven’t taken no as an answer.” She added: “The big difference was – they would compare the houses individually within the estate and say ‘your house is in the same band as your neighbour’.

“We had to get them to look outside the estate.”

She added: “We are very grateful to the VOA and the council that they’ve decided to correct this long standing anomaly or injustice. It’s nobody’s fault as such it’s just the system.”

Councillor Jonathan Essex (Redhill East, Green) told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “This lady took up the challenge, pulled together a comparison of properties to show the homes were out of line. It was submitted and lost, but then it was challenged and she needed to get every single resident on board, no mean feat. Then we finally heard back.

“This lady was a force of nature, it was her determination and persistence that made it all happen and it was a pleasure to support her. This gives people hope.”

A Reigate and Banstead Borough Council spokesperson said: “While the setting of Council Tax bands, and any associated appeals, are the remit of the Valuation Office Agency of HM Revenue & Customs, we are responsible for collecting Council Tax. We want people to pay the right amount and, where refunds are necessary, we aim to refund taxpayers as quickly as possible.”

The VOA said it could not comment on individual cases but that it works “extremely hard to ensure that all domestic properties are banded correctly” for Council Tax purposes. They added: “If a taxpayer thinks their band is wrong, they are able to contact us to submit a formal or informal challenge.”

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## Spelthorne in financial trouble

22 May 2024



Inspectors have been sent to Spelthorne Borough Council as concern grows over its ability to deal with its extreme debt and borrowing. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has been working with the borough since May 2022 and now the Secretary of State has weighed in over the “authority’s extremely high levels of debt and borrowing”.

A letter to Spelthorne Borough Council’s chief executive, confirming the department’s decision to appoint Lesley Seary to carry out a formal inspection of the council over its capital risk was published on Wednesday, May 8.

It read: “As of March 31 2023, Spelthorne’s debt was £1.096 billion, which was 87.1 times the council’s core spending power and 52.4 times its total service expenditure.”

The average borough council has a debt to spending ratio of 5.65.

A July review of the borough’s finances also found the council needed “expert independent support” to assist with its “immediate and ongoing financial challenges” and required help to mitigate its risk as well as improve its governance and

decision-making culture.

It comes just four months after another Surrey authority, Runnymede Borough Council was served a notice over its finances, and a year after Woking Borough Council declared itself bankrupt.

Concerns over the council's finances date back to a 2017/18 report from accountants KPMG – published in November 2022. It highlighted concerns over the council's investments and set out the auditor's view that Spelthorne Borough Council had acted unlawfully in borrowing and then purchasing three properties.

The Secretary of State has given certain directions to Lesley Seary's inspection. First, she will examine concerns over the council's governance and scrutiny, with particular attention to its financial arrangements and decision making. She is also looking into the council's ability to carry out its new housing strategy, as well as the impact its investment portfolio has had on service delivery.

The inspector, who will have right-of-access to all council premises and documents, will then report her findings to the Secretary of State by August 30. The council has also been told it cannot destroy any documentation or records.

The letter was sent as part of a best value directive from DLUHC. As part of the process the council must publish its response, together with the letters on its website.

The statement from Spelthorne Borough Council read: "Over a year ago, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) asked the professional body for public sector finance, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), to review Spelthorne Borough Council's investment portfolio and borrowing position.

"The authority has now received a letter from the department advising that they have appointed an independent inspector to undertake a review of Spelthorne Borough Council to seek assurance that the Council complying with its Best Value Duty.

"The Secretary of State decided to commission this inspection to provide him with direct, independent assurance that the council has 'arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, with regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.'

"The government letter outlines concerns around debt relative to size of the Council's budget and governance whilst acknowledging that Spelthorne Borough Council has engaged constructively with the Department since 2022 and already taken action to mitigate risk.

"DLUHC has appointed Lesley Seary as Lead Inspector, who is independent of government, and has asked her to report her findings to the Secretary of State by 30 August 2024."

Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Councillor Joanne Sexton welcomed the review and would work with the inspector and her team.

She said: "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 £200m and are pursuing alternative ways to deliver more affordable housing. We will continue to work with DLUHC 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."

Spelthorne's neediest lose out on housing

'Crisis point' in local government funding

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Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Ashford East councillor Joanne Sexton, at the council building in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

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## Making a racket for new padel centre

22 May 2024



**Leatherhead** could soon host international competition after Surrey's first indoor padel centre was approved. Padel is a racket sport of Mexican origin, typically played in doubles, and is like a mix between Tennis and Squash.

The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) has said it is committed to investing in the growth of padel and wants to build more courts that can be used throughout the year.

The new facilities, granted planning permission next to Leatherhead Leisure Centre by Mole Valley District Council, are

considered critical to sustaining this growth, the LTA said, and would enable more adults and juniors to enjoy, compete and experience the game.

Six new courts will be split by cafe area and viewing platform under a large dome next to Leatherhead Leisure Centre. Councillors agreed the benefits sports and recreation would bring to the borough outweighed the harm the 11 metres-tall dome would have on the green belt.

The LTA has also said the courts would be used at both national and international levels. The dome would be shielded to help it blend in to the surrounding area.

Councillor Roger Adams (Liberal Democrat, Bookham West) said: "I'm all for trees being used as screens and the more we can screen buildings the better and certainly this is a very large building, although it is green, it will be nice just to take the solid lines away by more planting."

Cllr Raj Haque (Liberal Democrat, Fetcham) said: "This proposal is one of the best ones in terms of sporting facilities that will be provided."

Cllr Simon Budd added that he was pleased the dome was going to be green as the white one in Dorking was now discoloured by mould.

The courts include parking for 24 cars and will occupy land used as a boating lake as well as storage for waste containers.

To help spread the game, developers said they would run outreach programs with nearby schools "encourage involvement with the facility" as well as set up a club and hold regular padel lessons.

The land council owned and will be leased for use as a padel facility and the dome structure will be fully enclosed to prevent significant light spillage.

Image - example of indoor padel centre

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## Little solace for Guildford from fraud report

22 May 2024



Weak governance and poor scrutiny at Guildford Borough Council created a 'quick fix culture' that allowed potentially millions of pounds to be defrauded from the public purse while vulnerable housing tenants suffered, a new report has found.

The council has apologised unreservedly and pledged to adopt every recommendation - of which there are more than 70 - after a Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) review found its practices posed a serious risk to residents.

The report, released on Tuesday May 7, covered how the culture at the council created an environment where housing budgets were able to skyrocket and pushed the authority towards bankruptcy.

It covers a general overview of the stages that lead to an arrest, two council staff members being suspended, and five agency workers having their contracts terminated.

In February 2022, the council agreed to invest a total of £24.5m to bring its housing stock up to standard and a three-year contract with a value of £5.4m was agreed for testing and inspection. In less than three years that ballooned to £18.9m spent - a £13.5m overspend.

There was an increase in complaints concerning repairs and enhancements from tenants, the review found. This happened while the Housing Surveyor Team was vacant and had no permanent surveyors.

The report read: "This lack of in-house expertise and capacity meant that the council often didn't inspect and check work and were reliant upon agency staff. There was also incompleteness of data which compounded matters." It added: "After making initial enquiries, it came to light that there was concern regarding risk to the council and the following matters were raised:

That work may have been ordered when it wasn't necessary. \*That work may have been ordered, invoiced and paid for when it was not completed at all or \*Not to a satisfactory standard. \*That duplicate invoices may have been submitted and paid for the same work. \*That works may have been ordered and undertaken that were not the responsibility of the council.

This triggered a criminal investigation in August 2023 resulting in the suspension of two employees and five agency workers having their contracts terminated.

Whistleblowers first raised the alarm in September 2022 but it was not until 2023 that serious action into how housing budgets of about £5.4m a year had ballooned to more than £17m.

The initial investigation was conducted by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council's anti-fraud unit before being handed over to the South East Regional Organised Crime Unit of the Police.

The council then ordered a series of reviews, with the results published late on Tuesday, May 7 - although the allegations of potential fraud were outside the review's scope.

Despite that shortcoming, the review did find there was serious failure to follow due process in the procurement and management of housing maintenance contracts.

The council has now published an in-depth improvement plan, with more than 70 recommendations, to address every finding from the two reports, and, it says, to ensure it provides services that residents and businesses can be proud of.

Leader of the Council, Councillor **Julia McShane**, said: 'The people of Guildford deserve better from their council and for that we give a heartfelt apology and a commitment to put right the long-standing issues which we have uncovered. We have invited scrutiny and embrace accountability and will not rest until we have a resilient, well managed council of which we can all be proud.'

Deputy leader, Cllr **Tom Hunt**, said: 'We apologise unreservedly to the residents and taxpayers of Guildford. The SOLACE reports identify serious issues around the council's governance, operations, and controls. This is unacceptable. We are utterly determined to root out every problem and to put matters right. The people of Guildford deserve nothing less.'

**Pedro Wrobel**, chief executive of Guildford and Waverley Borough Councils, said: "I recognise everything that the SOLACE reports identify, and accept all the findings in full. This is not okay, and I came here to deal with it. Over the past two and half months, we have been developing a comprehensive Improvement Plan to address the issues at Guildford Borough Council. It addresses every recommendation from these reports and goes further.

"I am delighted with the appointment of the Independent Assurance Panel. It is critical that we make everything open and transparent. We are here to do the right thing, not the easy thing. I am determined to ensure the council is sustainable, delivers excellent value for money, and provides services that our residents and businesses can be proud of.

"We will not do this alone. I look forward to working with partners and our communities and businesses to make Guildford a brilliant place to live, work and do business."

A police investigation and an employment investigation carried out by an external law firm are continuing, the council said.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service has read through the documents with this being the first of several stories to be written about the findings.

Further stories will look in greater detail at the steps the council is taking, the impact of the merger with Waverley Borough Council and the views of the community and residents.

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## Surrey County Council staff strike poll

22 May 2024



Staff at **Surrey County Council** are voting on whether to go on strike after receiving a revised pay offer which union bosses say is not good enough.

Union chiefs representing workers, including teachers and firefighters, have described the ballot as one of the most important in the branch's history and that it was time to make a stand against low pay.

The ballot papers were sent out to staff on May 7 and run until June 4 - when staff will decide whether to accept the council's revised offer or support the walk out.

Surrey County Council leader, Councillor **Tim Oliver** (Conservative) said it was important the authority "lived within its means" and that the offer was final. He said the council remained committed to getting the matter resolved so staff could receive pay increases as soon as possible.

Surrey Pay comprises pay bands PS1/2 to PS14 and pay bands for senior managers PS15 to Chief Executive. The council's

original offer of between £1,124 to £1,682 for grades PS3-PS9, was overwhelmingly rejected. Unions had been asking for a £3,500 increase across the board.

In March, workers warned the local authority of a potential walkout after a “record number” of people backed strike action – unless there was a significantly improved pay offer. The council came back and is now offering a £1,800 increase to all staff on PS6 and below, unions have said. Those on between PS7 and PS10 are still on the old deals. Sick pay will return to six months full pay and six months half pay, double its current levels.

Lead negotiator **Paul Couchman** has said this shows the council can be moved. He said: “This is going to be one of the most important votes in our UNISON branch history. The council has already shown that we can move them. We believe we can get a better, fairer, offer if we get a result in this ballot.

“Last year we were just 40 votes short of reaching the legal minimum of 50 per cent of members voting. This is the year we make a stand.”

Earlier this year a consultative online ballot was held with 53 per cent of members responding, 87 per cent of whom voted to reject the offer and 91 per cent saying they would support strike action if there wasn’t a significantly improved offer.

The Strike Committee felt the council has not moved far enough and has moved to a full postal legal strike ballot. The two general trade unions representing employees said members were being left behind – both national pay awards as well as most other local councils.

According to the unions about a thirds of Surrey staff are paid below a ‘minimum standard of income’, based on research provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The revised offer would see the lowest hourly rate of pay would be £12.04, higher than both the Real Living Wage and Statutory National Living Wage.

Unison is asking its members to reject the offer.

It comes as, last February, there was a “catastrophic” Surrey payroll glitch that left workers unable to pay mortgages or afford food for their children “We really do deserve better,” a statement from Unison read.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council: “We have made a revised improved final offer and remain committed to getting the matter resolved so that our staff can receive their pay increase as soon as possible. However it’s imperative that the offer is within our means.

“The council is not immune to the challenges of the current economic landscape, rising costs and inflation pressures, and we must ensure we remain in a position to deliver vital public services and protect our most vulnerable in our communities throughout.”

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## First Surrey Borough with no Conservative Councillors

22 May 2024



The Conservatives have been wiped out in Woking after voters handed the Liberal Democrats a huge mandate. The final tally tightened the Lib Dems grip on power giving them 24 seats, up four from last year’s election – and left the Tories with none and Labour with just one seat on the bankrupt local authority. The remaining five seats are held by independents.

The Conservatives came into the day holding just four of the council’s 30 seats but they failed to hold on to any as ward after ward continued to punish the party – which as recently as 2021 had been the borough’s largest group.

The result makes it the first council in Surrey not to have a single Conservative councillor and serves as a major warning to the party of a difficult road ahead in the upcoming general election.

Josh Brown, the former Conservative councillor who lost his seat in the Byfleet and Byfleet West ward said: “The Woking Conservatives will continue to hold the Liberal Democrats, Independent and Labour on the council to account with

regards to increases in council tax and increased borrowing.”

He would later add: “People of Woking have clearly had their say and we respect that, but the process going forward is who is going to hold this super majority to account? “I think there will be a muted scrutiny function and that Woking and all of our residents will be worse off.”

The biggest swing of the day came in Canalside with the Liberal Democrats overturning a Labour majority of 570 to take the seat.

Leader of the Council Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, who held on to her Goldsworth Park seat said: “It’s a huge result for the Liberal Democrats, given the year we’ve had (referencing the Section 114 bankruptcy notice).

“To get such an overwhelming majority, resulting in existing councillors with increased majorities and gaining four seats. It’s a massive responsibility and we’ve got a huge mandate to take it forward and we’ve showed that we can do that over the last couple of years. Scrutiny is very important. We still have independent and Labour councillors, but the importance for scrutiny is critical friends and constructive criticism – and that should come from both within and beyond the group.

“First priority is to get the new councillors trained inducted and working on their roles to deliver for residents and clearly finances are in our mind all the time and our work to deliver on our budget and next year’s budget.”

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## Umpire pulls up stumps on cricket plan

22 May 2024



A long-standing Surrey cricket club’s ambitious plans to construct modern facilities has sparked controversy in the local community, leading to a tense planning decision.

Banstead Cricket Club’s plans to modernise its ground have been rejected, by the narrowest of margins. The club, which has been in the village for more than a century and a half, had hoped to update its dilapidated changing rooms and clubhouse to give it a home ground fit for the 21st century.

Residents living near the ground objected over the harm it would do to the character of the green belt. In a nail-biting finish it hinged on whether there were exceptional circumstances to build on the green belt. In the end it came down to the chairman to cast the deciding vote after members were split down the middle.

In an unusual turn of events the planning chair voted against officer recommendations and the cricket club’s plans were refused. Councillor Simon Parnall said: “I knew this was going to happen. You have your name on the block sometimes.”

He added: “Given the weight of the meeting, and the way that people have their feelings quite openly expressed, I, contrary to my normal position which is to support officers, I think now I ought to stand and vote for the reason for refusal because this is so controversial and it would need another go.”

Reasons the club had wanted new facilities included money gained by renting out the space for events. It was also in part due to the massive growth of the game among girls and women, and therefore the need for changing rooms for women.

Martin Long said he was representing the 107 objectors who had written in against the development, where he claims the vast majority live in Banstead Village. He said: “The report does not mention that of the 157 letters of support only 10 per cent are from addresses within the borough.

He said there are three other community venues in the borough, all with better access, and questioned why a fourth was needed. He told the meeting that the Lady Neville park was given to the people of Banstead, not the Banstead Cricket Club.

Opposition focused on the scale of the development and not the club’s need to modernise. He added: “A vast two-storey

development would be an appalling blot on the green belt, the surrounding treeline and the view from the park itself.

“A single storey cricket club house is all that is needed not a vast function venue with an all round terrace. The impact of noise and traffic that this new facility will have on residents is unimaginable.”

The Thursday, April 24, meeting of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council’s planning committee heard the primary focus of the club was the provision of cricket but it needed revenue for other activities to survive financially. The club wanted to demolish its current clubhouse and replace it with a new modern facility to conform with “Sport England and the sports governing body standards”.

It also wanted to refurbish its pavilion to create a dedicated changing space for women and girls. The plans had been recommended for approval and received more letters of support than opposition during the consultation stage, although it was argued the majority if this came from outside the borough.

Ray Smythe, a resident of De Burgh Park which backs on to the grounds, spoke against the plans. He said they were inappropriate for the green belt and should only be approved if there were very special circumstances.

He said: “The positioning of the new premises will eliminate the only distinct view from the recreation ground that is not currently obscured by buildings in the area.” He added that clubhouse’s second floor was not needed for cricket and the financial implications were not a planning matter. He said they could also reduce the cost of the project by scaling back the clubhouse.

Arguing for the plans was Ian Thorpe who told the meeting the club had been in Banstead since 1850 and that its facilities were no longer fit for purpose. The new proposals, which had already been scaled back and revised, was needed to fit in with the latest guidelines for sport.

He said the clubhouse was no longer compliant for all players regardless of gender or age and that the site would operate under its current licensing hours with no desire to extend them further. He said: “Its hoped that the facility will be more than just a cricket club to the local community. With this proposal Banstead Cricket Club is seeking to offer its members and the local community a clubhouse to be proud of.”

Related reports:

Just not cricket to replace Banstead pavilion?

Image - visualisation of new pavilion and current inset.

## Police post taken down before election

22 May 2024



The Surrey Police and Crime Commission social media team were made to remove a graphic from Twitter, now X and Facebook after a complaint it could influence the May 2 elections.

The post was made during the run up to the election when public bodies are supposed to remain completely impartial to avoid favouring any one candidate or using taxpayer money to look to influence voters.

The message said it had re-opened funding for local services that promote community safety, support children and young people and help reduce reoffending in Surrey. It was accompanied by an image that showed more than £2m had been provided to support local services in the last financial year.

The complainant, the Liberal Democrat Councillor for Bagshot and North Windlesham Richard Wilson, felt this was a breach of pre-election publicity rules.

Writing to the Monitoring Officer, he said: “Any reasonable person would conclude that the post, in particular its use of the graphics, is likely to improve the electorate’s opinion of the incumbent PCC ( Police and Crime Commissioner). This constitutes a breach of the guidance and, therefore, of the rules laid out in the Acts.

“It would be possible to direct readers to the funding website without publicising the £2m which has already been provided. This piece of information is wholly unnecessary and its purpose is clearly to promote the PCC. This is a use of public resources to influence an election.”

After receiving the complaint, Alison Bolton, chief executive and monitoring officer of the Police and Crime Commission, told the communication team to delete the images but felt the text was fine to be republished - and did not merit an apology.

Media policies had been reviewed ahead of the pre-election period and the use of social media and their website has been “significantly” limited, she added.

The posts were scheduled, she said, as the funding process opened on April 1 and they wanted to give organisations the

greatest amount of time possible to apply. She said: “Your view that the posts are “likely to improve the electorate’s opinion of the incumbent PCC” is arguably a subjective one. I can assure you that the posts were made in good faith by comms colleagues with the intention of promoting a funding opportunity and not, as you suggest, to “promote the PCC. “We had purposefully not made reference to the incumbent PCC or included any images of her.

“That said, I recognise that the aim of promoting the funds could have been achieved with a simpler post and as such, I have asked my colleagues to remove the posts that include the ‘graphic’. We will re-issue the link, but I don’t believe that issuing an apology is necessary.”

A spokesperson for the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner said it restricted its output to some “business-as-usual work” in line with pre-election guidelines.

They said: “On April 3, the Communications Team posted a message on social media highlighting the process for which organisations and services can apply to our funding streams which opened for the new financial year two days earlier on April 1.

“These streams provide vital support for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities including victims of crime, young people and domestic abuse survivors as well as funding important projects that enhance community safety across Surrey.

“Allocating these funds and commissioning these important services is a significant role that the OPCC undertakes and we wanted to give local organisations the greatest amount of time possible to apply. The message posted did not name or reference the current PCC or contain any image of her. However the message did have an accompanying graphic which highlighted the amount of funding the office had provided to support local services during the last financial year.

“The post was created in good faith with the intention of promoting the funding opportunity and was not designed to promote the current Commissioner. However upon review by the OPCC Monitoring Officer, the decision was taken to remove the graphic and replace it with one that had removed the reference to the amount of funding given last year to avoid any inference during the pre-election period.

“The current commissioner was not aware and did not have any involvement in the creation of the original message.”

The elections for the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner take place countywide on Thursday May 2. Counting takes place the following day with the results expected around 2pm.

The vote takes place across Surrey with the count taking place the following day with the result expected to be announced between 3pm and 4pm.

Related reports:

[Surrey’s next Police and Crime Commissioner will be?](#)

[Epsom and Ewell candidates dominate Police Commissioner election](#)

[Surrey Police funding: not a fair cop](#)

[The Cost of Surrey’s Crime Commissioner: “It’s criminal”?](#)

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## Leatherhead residents call for more policing

22 May 2024



A serious assault that left a man fighting for his life has left a community in shock - with some saying there aren’t enough police officers and others calling for greater CCTV provision.

On Sunday night (April 21) a man was attacked near a Leatherhead nursery by up to four teenagers.

Surrey Police has said an 18-year-old man and a 17-year-old boy have been arrested on suspicion of attempted murder with enquiries ongoing to identify and locate two other people.

Surrey Police say they do not anticipate a wider risk to the public at this time.

The violent attack, in Cleeve Road, comes on the eve of the May 2 Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner elections. with people able to cast their vote on how crime is tackled and to make sure the police provide a good service.

The Local Democracy Service visited the town to get people’s views on whether they felt safe, and if they planned to vote in the upcoming ballot.

If the 2021 election is a fair guide then the candidates have their work cut out to get their message to the public with the winning candidate getting 155,116 total votes, out of a Surrey population of 1.19 million,

As a percentage that figure is low but overall it makes them the individual with the highest single vote total in the county, more than any MP.

Leatherhead is one of the main towns in Mole Valley and lies near the M25. This good connectivity has brought its own issues, particularly transient crime.

One shopper in the town felt the area was no different to anywhere else, saying: "It's the same as in most towns. You get young kids. There was a robbery the other day at Leatherhead Station which is worrying, especially if you get a train on your own."

She added that she wasn't aware that elections for the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner were due to take place on May 2.

After the Cleeve Road attack, residents took to social media calling for better CCTV, an issue that has taken greater prominence after it emerged that 77 public-space cameras in Mole Valley were left unmonitored when Reigate Police Station closed due to dangerous RAAC.

Jen Royal said she wouldn't be voting in the elections as she was unaware of who was running or what they stood for, but was not happy with the direction of travel the force was going.

She said: "Policing on the whole....People call them out and it doesn't matter if it's small crimes or big crimes and they don't appear to get a lot of response."

One shopper who has lived in Leatherhead for 50 years was more aware of the four candidates standing for the position.

She told the LDRS: "It's not safe to go out in the evening. That's why I take a stick".

She says the area has changed a lot in that time with many of the smaller shops disappearing, adding "it's like a ghost town...you never see any police officers.

"We used to see them walking down the road and quite a few cars going by, but now nothing. It's a shame. There should be more police on the streets."

Asked if she had heard of the upcoming elections, she said she already voted before suddenly opening her bag saying "thank you for reminding me, I need to post it, I'm carrying it here in my bag."

The Sunday assault happened at night in the north of the town and the victim was taken to hospital and is in serious condition.

According to the most recent published data there were 41 crimes reported in February in Leatherhead, including 11 instances of violence and sexual offences, eight for anti-social behaviour and six for public disorder.

Olive Lee was on her way to the Fairfield Centre in Leatherhead, somewhere she sees as a real asset to the town and where she visits regularly. Some of the people the LDRS spoke with wished north Leatherhead had similar facilities for younger people.

Olive said: "Some of my friends in the centre are worried about going out in the evening but I like Leatherhead as a place.

"I moved in with my daughter about six or seven years ago, I had retired to Cornwall, or so I thought, and I am quite happy here as a place. But I don't go out in the evening."

She said she was undecided about voting though as the polling station was too far from home, though she admitted it was an important election.

Olive added: "I think it makes a difference, who is running the police, but I don't know too much about the candidates."

The Police and Crime Commissioner is responsible for holding the Chief Constable and Surrey Police to account - on the public's behalf. They are also tasked with overseeing how crime is tackled and ensuring Surrey Police provides a good service.

All British, Irish or EU citizens, as well as qualifying Commonwealth citizens with permission to enter or stay in the UK, can vote so long as they are over 18 and registered in Surrey can vote, unless legally excluded.

The general feeling in the town is one where it feels safe, particularly compared with London, but Leatherhead is not without its issues.

A woman said: "It feels safe in the town and you don't hear about too many of these things bar a few very serious incidents and they are very few and far between.

"I don't know about the Police and Crime Commissioner elections but I will vote, I just need to find out (about the candidates and what they stand for).

"Another worry is always anti-social behaviour but I don't see it. If you come in in the evening it's fine."

The vote takes place across Surrey with the count taking place the following day with the result expected to be announced between 3pm and 4pm.

Related reports:

Surrey's next Police and Crime Commissioner will be?

Epsom and Ewell candidates dominate Police Commissioner election

Jen Royal Leatherhead (Image Chris Caulfield)

## Not in Epsom and Ewell but other Surrey elections test the water...

22 May 2024



The fate of 116 council seats in Surrey are up for grabs as voters head to the polls on Thursday, May 2. There are 11 boroughs and districts in the county, with widespread voting taking place in six - Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead, Runnymede, Tandridge and Woking. There is also a bye-election for a single seat on Waverley Borough Council.

There are no local council elections this year in Epsom & Ewell, Guildford, Spelthorne, and Surrey Heath Borough Councils.

With a general election less than a year away, this vote will be viewed in some quarters as a significant bellwether for the race for Downing Street. Counting will begin on Friday May 3.

The first results area expected to come out of Woking Borough Council at 4pm, followed by Runnymede and Tandridge at 5pm. Mole Valley and Reigate and Banstead councils are predicted to declare by 6pm with Elmbridge tellers expected to be wrapped up by 6.30pm.

Do I need photo id? Yes -you need to bring valid photo identification in order to vote this year. Valid IDs include expired official documents such as passports that still have a strong resemblance. Voters without an accepted ID can apply for the free Voter Authority Certificate - a fast track card that will allow people to vote.

### Elmbridge Borough Council

Number of seats up for election: 16

Election result expected: 6.30pm Friday, May 3.

Largest party: Liberal Democrats

There are 48 seats in total on Elmbridge Borough Council with 16, one third of the total, up for grabs on May 2. The Liberal Democrats have 20 councillors, Residents' Associations, 16, and the Conservatives, 12. The Liberal Democrats became the largest party in the borough, overtaking their coalition partners - Residents' Association - last year in a borough that has been historically Conservative.

The Esher and Walton parliamentary constituency largely covers Elmbridge and is represented by Dominic Raab, who resigned from the cabinet on April 21. He later announced he would quit as MP at the next general election.

### Mole Valley District Council

Number of seats up for election: 14

Election result expected: 6pm Friday, May 3.

Largest party: Liberal Democrats

A boundary review last year led to all out-elections across the borough, delivering a sweeping victory for the Liberal Democrats. This year, Mole Valley District Council reverts to electing its members by thirds across its 13 wards. In Capel, Leigh, Newdigate and Charlwood voters will be sending two representatives, bringing the total elected this year to 14 as they replace the seat formerly held by Lesley Bushnell, In total there are 39 councillors in the district.

The council is currently controlled by the Liberal Democrats who have 29 elected members. The opposition is formed from six informal independents and three Conservatives. At a national level the Conservative Mole Valley MP since 1997, Sir Paul Beresford, said he will not stand in the next general election.

### Reigate and Banstead Borough Council

Number of seats up for election: 16

Election result expected: 6pm Friday, May 3.

Largest party: Conservative

The Conservatives, with 22 councillors, are the single largest party in Reigate and Banstead but do not have overall control of the borough council. In the 2023 election, the Tories lost seats to the Green Party, which now has 11 councillors and Labour, one. The rest of the authority is made up of five Residents' Association, three Lib Dems, two independents.

Voting takes place across in each of the borough's 15 wards with one person elected in each. The exception is in Tattenham Corner and Preston where, to fill a vacancy, two members will be elected.

Conservative MP for Reigate Crispin Blunt announced in 2022 that he would not run for re-election, having first won the

seat in 1997.

In January Mr Blunt was re-bailed until April after his arrest on suspicion of rape and possession of controlled substances.  
Runnymede Borough Council

Number of seats up for election: 15  
Election result expected: 5pm Friday, May 3.  
Largest party: Conservative

Runnymede Borough Council went to no overall control in 2023 but has had a Conservative leader ever since its formation in 1974. Going into this May's election there are 18 Conservative councillors, six Runnymede Independent Residents Group, five independents, four Labour, four Liberal Democrats, two Green Party, and one Reform UK - after former Tory and current deputy mayor Robert Bromley crossed the floor.

Runnymede is one of the three Surrey councils, the others being Spelthorne and Woking, to rank in the top five nationally for local authorities with the largest average debt per resident.

The MP for the area - which also includes Weybridge in neighbouring Elmbridge, is Ben Spencer. He was elected in 2019 with 54.9 per cent of the vote, ahead of Labour candidate Robert King, 20.6 per cent.

Waverley Borough Council

Number of seats up for election: 1  
Election result expected: Early Friday, May 3.  
Largest party: Liberal Democrats

Waverley Borough Council has 50 councillors across 24 wards that are voted for in an "all out" elections where every seat is decided. This year however is the much smaller matter of the race for the vacant Witley and Milford Borough seat in a May 2 by-election. The last all out vote was in 2023 when the council remained in no overall control.

The Liberal Democrats are the largest party with 22 councillors and are in coalition with the Farnham Residents' 13 members, Labour's two officials and the single representative of the Green Party. There are 10 councillors on the Conservative opposition and a further two independent members.

The MP representing the greatest number of people who call Waverley Borough Council home is the chancellor Jeremy Hunt. The 57-year-old MP was first elected to the Southwest Surrey constituency in May 2005.

Woking Borough Council

Number of seats up for election: 11  
Election result expected: 4pm, Friday, May 3.  
Largest party: Liberal Democrats

Woking Borough Council votes in thirds -with one councillor elected in each of its 10 wards. A by-election to fill the vacancy in Hoe Valley to bring the total number of seats decided up to 11. Voters in Woking began to turn their backs on the Conservatives after its financial problems became clear. The borough had a Tory leader from 2007 up until 2022 when the Liberal Democrats took control. Going into the May 2024 local elections the Lib Dems hold 19 of the 30 potential seats on the council with the four Conservatives making up the official opposition group.

The rest of the council is made up of four independent members, two from Labour and one vacant seat.

MP Jonathan Lord, who assumed office in 2010, was given a vote of confidence by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to hold his seat in the next General Election.

Tandridge District Council

Number of seats up for election: 43  
When is the election result expected: 5pm Friday, May 3.  
Largest party: Residents' Alliance

Every seat on Tandridge District Council will be decided when voters go to the polls on May 2. This year there will be 43 councillors returned to 18 wards, up from the current number of 42 - after the Local Government Boundary Commission for England redrew the electoral map. Previously the council elected its members by thirds.

Currently Tandridge District Council is led by the Residents' Alliance, which holds 18 seats. The Liberal Democrats, 11, Conservative nine and Independent Group, four, comprise the rest of the council.

The nearest matching parliamentary constituency is East Surrey, currently held by the energy secretary Claire Coutinho after she was elected in 2019.

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## Just not cricket to replace Banstead pavilion?

22 May 2024



A long-standing cricket club's ambitious plans to construct a modern pavilion and expand its facilities have sparked a debate from people that live in the area, saying it would "ruin the village feel".

A centuries old sports club wants to modernise its facilities, in part due to the massive growth of the game among girls and women, although some warn its ambitious plans overstep the mark.

**Banstead Cricket Club** has applied to demolish its current clubhouse, which it says was only ever designed to last 10 years but has stood for 60, and replace it with a new modern facility that conforms to "Sport England and the sports governing body standards".

It is also seeking to refurbish its pavilion to create a dedicated changing space for women and girls. While opponents to the plans aren't arguing against its need to modernise, and would like to see the 182-year-old cricket club get a new clubhouse - they say they are worried about the size and location of the plans. They feel the potential increase in social events at the site, could have a negative impact on people living near the ground.

The club, however, told the Local Democracy Reporting Service that they are "not trying to just suddenly become an events business" and that "the most important thing to stress is that Banstead Cricket Club is a cricket club". The application has already had 252 comments with the majority (151) backing the plans and 91 objecting.

Club chairperson Neil Bowman said: "We need something bigger and we need something that has more than one room. We need to have other areas where people can hang out, or have a team meeting. We didn't design it as a wedding venue, and we do appreciate the neighbours' concerns, there was a concern about creating an event venue, and all the additional traffic, noise.

"I can entirely understand people's concerns, but we are not trying to do that, we are trying to build a modern clubhouse." The club said that Sport England and the England and Wales Cricket Board have been consulted in terms of the most ideal siting for the new building and it's the internal layout.

Its new location will allow people to take in matches from either of the club's two pitches. The club has also said it will re-lay its car park with an environmentally friendly solution. Project head Ian Rusbridge said: "We are not trying to just suddenly become an events business, that's not our game.

"We don't foresee (a surge in) event hire, there may be a little bit more during the summer - because at the moment we can't hire it out at all. The other thing to stress, is that the cricket club is run by volunteers, who have full time jobs, and lives and children. They haven't got the capacity to run a cricket club let alone an events business. " Adding to that, in terms of the design the architects we employed, their speciality is sport pavilions."

The club has a licence until 1am but says it is rarely used and that the events held usually stop serving alcohol at 11pm. It said it did not see this changing in the future. Among the objections however include the increase in traffic around the green belt area, noise that would come from an expanded pavilion, and the determination visual impact it would have.

One objector wrote that the scale of the two-storey building was "far too large" and would "ruin the village feel" of the site. He felt the current buildings were perfectly adequate and would support plans that improved and updated the facilities within the same space.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service spoke with another resident who has also written in to object. Robert Garbut lives off Park Road, near the club, and challenged the size of the plans, its impact on traffic and neighbourhood fears the site could become a late-night venue.

He said: "It's massive. It's a 350 per cent increase over two floors, on another field that had never been built on before. Earth-moving trucks that will have to move into the park - I'm sure people just don't realise what is happening. Having said all of that, the cricket club has been there for a hundred years, it's hugely successful, they need more changing rooms.

"We assumed they would knock down the old clubhouse and build an all-singing all-dancing version of that. They also own the practice field adjacent to that - that's where they want to build, you can understand that as it makes sense to build it on your own land rather than land owned by Reigate and Banstead Council.

"All of our objections are about the superscale of this social venue, nobody but nobody wants to be mean spirited. We want the club to be a great building not the ramshackle thing they're in now."

The planning application is still with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council's planning team. A date has yet to be set for when it will be determined.

Image - visualisation of new pavilion and current inset.

# Surrey Councils holding unclaimed tax refunds

22 May 2024

Council	Value of refunds owed	Number of accounts owed
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council	Failed to share the requested data	
Elmbridge Borough Council	Failed to share the requested data	
Tandridge District Council	Failed to share the requested data	
Guildford Borough Council (rolling)	£323,769.96	1,086
Spelthorne Borough Council	£307,273.08	1,245
Mole Valley District Council	£249,456.01	802
Reigate & Banstead Borough Council	£218,883.91	755
Waverley Borough Council	£157,452.49	566
Woking Borough Council	£148,046.16	566
Surrey Heath Borough Council	£83,660.34	293
Runnymede Borough Council	£5,777.17	4

Councils in Surrey are holding nearly £1.5million in overpaid tax that can be claimed back. People who moved to a different borough after paying their tax are supposed to be sent a closing bill. If an account is in credit, overpayments are refunded.

When this is not possible, for example if the council does not have a resident's forwarding address, the overpaid cash can sit in a pot until a claim is made - or the residents return to the borough.

In Surrey, that figure is a combined £1,493,722.12 for eight of the 11 councils. As for the others (Elmbridge, Tandridge and **Epsom and Ewell**) their figures remain unclear.

The three most common reasons for overpayments are when someone moves out of their house and has already paid, changes to a property's tax band, or when residents forget to cancel standing orders when they move.

The two biggest stockpiles are held by Guildford and Spelthorne Borough Councils, and account for more than £600,000. This is according to data released under Freedom on Information to Money Saving Expert.

Tax not claimed back can be written off by a council - to balance the cost of bad debts - however Guildford Borough Council said it reinstates the money if a resident comes forward to claim the credit.

Guildford Borough Council told the Local Reporting Democracy Service it has refunded 12,793 people on both closed and open accounts with a total value of £4.4 million, since April 2021. It says nearly a third of these were refunded through MyGuildford online accounts.

A spokesperson for Guildford Borough Council said: "It's important that we are provided with a forwarding address so we can send closing bills or retrospective bill changes.

"If a refund is not claimed, the money will remain on the account until the resident claims it or becomes liable for council tax in our borough again." They added: "To be transparent, we roll over overpaid council tax every year. If other councils have already written off credits, their credit value will be reduced."

Guildford council added that they don't have a specific deadline for claiming overpaid council tax. But to avoid fraudulent claims, they ask residents to provide proof of the overpayment. The older the claim, the more proof is needed.

A spokesperson for Spelthorne Borough Council said: "Tax refunds occur for a number of reasons, for example if a resident has moved from the borough or they have paid a bill in advance and Spelthorne Borough Council proactively issues any council tax refunds which are due.

"Where accounts are in credits, statements are sent with refund application to the last known address, if we hold bank details refunds are refunded directly back to the bank account that they were paid from. Where accounts are constantly paying in credit, copy bills are sent to prompt a response from the payer to claim the overpayment back.

"Residents can keep track of their council tax bill by registering for the self-service customer portal online or call the team on 01784 451499."

Elmbridge Borough Council, which did not respond to the FOI, said it refunds overpaid council tax if a resident's account is in credit and does not owe any other amounts of tax.

People who move within the borough will usually have credits from their previous address transferred across, while those leaving the area can arrange a refund.

[Nationwide the London Borough of Newham holds the highest of £9,539,750 and Surrey's Runnymede fourth lowest of £5,777.]

Contact your local authority for specific advice on claiming it back, as this is likely to differ.

## Floods with silver linings for Guildford's housing targets?

22 May 2024



Guildford has been given the “biggest opportunity” to transform itself in a century. The Environment Agency is looking into an expanded flood prevention scheme that would save homes and businesses from rising waters - and open up previously unusable town-centre land for new housing. Supporters say the upshot of this is huge.

Councils have to identify land for housing in order to meet Government set targets, but Guildford Borough Council had to recently disregard 50 sites because they were subject to flooding - 30 of which were in the town centre, the Local Democracy Reporting Service was told.

If the expanded flood alleviation scheme goes ahead it would instantly increase the amount of land in the town and in a swoop take pressure off green belt villages.

Former councillor John Rigg said that the town has been waiting affected by floods for almost 100 years and that it would only get worse if nothing was done. He said: “The Environment Agency’s planning period anticipates a 72 per cent increase in rainfall in the Guildford area. Not steady rain, big downpours.”

He said the problem was compounded as towns upstream - for example in Waverley - pressed on with their own developments.

Mr Rigg said: “When the Government said Guildford had to deliver 10,000 homes, they had to all go in the green belt and the villages, because nobody got the flooding scheme underway and released the brownfield sites. When Guildford was looking at land for development as part of its local plan, there were 50 sites that had to be disregarded because they were subject to flooding, 30 of them in the town centre.”

Among those are the Millmead and Millbrook car parks.

He said: “We have got to get the flood alleviation plan adopted. The EA has said there is £7bn allocated to areas that deliver economics and social benefits. This ticks all the boxes. It’s an important town, it’s a county town and it needs homes and businesses. The previous scheme was a minimum, just to stop a couple of streets flooding, but this does it properly, it frees up brownfield sites. It’s the biggest opportunity for Guildford since about 1900. Last week, by the cinema it flooded, it was up to people’s knees, as far as this town is concerned, they need to wake up.”

Guildford has a long history of flooding from the River Wey, and the Environment Agency, working with the borough council and Surrey County Council, are looking to reduce the high level of flood risk to the town centre.

The project is still in its appraisal stage, but the EA has confirmed it is looking to create a larger protection zone than initial plans from 2018. It expects to take up to three years to finalise the scheme as it undertakes assessments, surveys and public engagement - the first of which takes place at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre on Thursday April 18, from 2pm to 7pm.

Jon Mansbridge, Guildford Flood Alleviation Scheme project director at the Environment Agency, said: “The feedback we gather from communities during our engagement is really valuable in helping to inform the preferred option.” He added: “The flood defences will be visually integrated into existing and regenerated areas of the river corridor, reducing flood risk to even more of the town centre.”

Councillor Joss Bigmore, former co-leader of Guildford Borough Council said: “Finally the Environment Agency is supporting the council by backing a flood alleviation scheme. “We’ve been patient, nobody has the money to do these things, and it’s positive that we are at the top of the queue.

“Hopefully we can come up with a comprehensive solution and hopefully we can eradicate the risk of flooding for the centre of Guildford for the next century.” He added: “For existing residents it very important - and if there is a solution it will unlock a lot of regeneration opportunities on former flood risk areas.”

Flooding in Guildford Feb 2020 (image Environment Agency)

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## Big employment hub coming to Leatherhead

22 May 2024



The future of a possibly major employment hub in Leatherhead has been given a huge “vote of confidence”.

Four new buildings and 13 industrial warehouse units will be built in the north of the town after decision-makers backed plans to modernise part of the Cleeve Road Business Park Research Area.

Three “rather tired” buildings, Alpha, Beta, and Cetec, will be torn down to make way for modern facilities that meet the “expectations of employers and businesses today”.

The decision, backed unanimously at the Wednesday, April 3 meeting of Mole Valley’s Development Committee, had widespread support within the room given the area was already earmarked as a business park by the borough’s planners.

Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (LD, Leatherhead North) said: “I am broadly in favour of this.

“I think it is a sort of vote of confidence in the industrial unit there, and the site, and the future of it, which is a really good thing.

“I’m pleased to see investment being put into that area.”

Cllr Chris Hunt (Ind, Ashtead Lanes & Common) said: “I really think this application is good.

“I love the mix in the size of the units, I think that appeals to firms throughout.”

He said the noise, lighting and access were all positive and added: “ It’s the right site at the right time.”

Among the comments received during the planning process were concerns over the loss of existing pedestrian and cycle access.

Councillors did urge the developers Stefania Chancerygate (Leatherhead No. 1) Limited, to keep these throughways, particularly for those who work at the site as they would benefit from easy routes into town – but were told it was not a planning matter.

The meeting heard the site had good access to the M25 and that “strategically” this was where the council would direct this type of development “as it would boost employment and promote growth”.

The new plans include 112 parking bays, of which at least 50 per cent must have fast-charge sockets before any of the units are allowed to open for trading.

Cllr Phil Hammond (LD, Fetcham): “The employment land strategically for the district is really important and this is a big area but it’s got rather tired and it’s not really meeting the expectations of employers and businesses today.

“It needs upgrading, it’s important employment, we need that in north Leatherhead and we need that in the north of the district.”

Image: Leatherhead Business Park (Mole Valley Planning Portal)

## Tree felling foul of the law

22 May 2024



The culprits who illegally chopped down more than 100 protected trees and damaged seven others have been fined nearly £20,000, Woking Borough Council said.

A landowner, together with its contractor were prosecuted and fined for the unauthorised felling of the trees near Upshot Lane, Pyrford, after pleading guilty at Guildford Magistrates’ Court.

Burhill Development Ltd admitted it ignored a tree preservation order on its land and was made to pay £15,140, comprising fines of £11,000, a victim surcharge of £2,000 and costs of £2,140.

Their contractor, P&A Services, which carried out the work, also pleaded guilty to the unauthorised felling and causing damage to the protected trees and was ordered to pay a total of £2,900; fines of £1,000; a victim surcharge of £400; and

council costs of £1,500.

The action was taken against the two firms by Woking Borough Council. The original hearing took place in October 2023 with the judge issuing sentence in March 2024.

Speaking about the prosecution, Beverley Kuchar, Woking Borough Council's strategic director for place, described it as an "important case" and welcomed the decision.

She said: "Whether you permit or cause wilful damage to our environment we will take legal action wherever necessary.

"It is important that landowners and their contractors take the necessary steps to understand what consent is required before commencing tree works.

"The status of the borough's trees can be checked quickly and simply online. If in doubt, our arboricultural team can provide advice in advance of any works commencing.

"There is no excuse and, as in this case, failure to do so can lead to a criminal prosecution and significant fines."

Tree Preservation Orders protect specific trees, groups of trees, or woodland that benefit the wider community

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## Was County HQ sold for a song?

22 May 2024



Surrey County Council faces scrutiny over its £25 million sale of a former headquarters site after it was revealed it could have a gross development value of £250 million once redeveloped is completed. The new owner of the former HQ has listed the site for sale with a gross development value of 10 times more than the council got when it sold the historic building in 2021.

The huge gap between the two figures led to the county council to be challenged on whether it got the best deal for residents although the lead member for property said it secured a "good deal" and would sell it again at the same price. The 5.2 acre site in Kingston is being marketed by Savills. It is described as a "landmark opportunity" with "stunning former County Hall buildings" and has planning permission for 254 private apartments, 16 shared ownership apartments, and 20 affordable rent apartments.

Rob Pollock, Savills director, London development, said in a statement promoting the sale: "With its scale and heritage, Surrey County Hall offers the opportunity to deliver a truly unique development in southwest London that might seem more at home in central London, and consequently appeal to buyers across the city. With world famous attractions like Hampton Court and Wimbledon Tennis Club in striking distance of the property, combined with the obvious curb-side appeal, we expect that the ultimate developer of the property will set new record for pricing in Kingston."

The sale was discussed during the Tuesday March, 19 meeting of Surrey County Council. In March 2021 Surrey County Council sold the site for about £25m to RER Kingston Limited, according to officers although it was suggested the figure may have been "in excess" of that.

Councillor Robert Evans (Lab Stanwell and Stanwell Moor) asked: "When Surrey County Council was selling County Hall, its former Kingston headquarters, developers RER issued a release stating it had a guide price of £20m. This week Savills has issued a press release stating the site now has a Gross Development Value of £250m.

"Can the council tell us exactly how much it got for its former Grade 2 listed site, and whether it feels this was best value for residents seeing as it now has the potential to bring in hundreds of millions of pounds for its new owners?"

In a written response, he was told the council sold the site for £25million, on a subject to contract only basis, following "an extensive open marketing campaign for which best value was secured". Since the sale, RER (Kingston) Ltd has been holding the 300,000 sq. ft site vacant, while pursuing a planning application through the Royal Borough of Kingston to convert much of the former complex into residential units.

The official council response read: "Costs would have been incurred for empty business rate liability, which would have been circa £700,000 per annum alongside security and other holding void costs. "Although planning consent is now expected, RER have placed the complex on the market through Savills.

"Whilst the agents suggest a potential value post development, it should be noted that when fully sold or let, this is not the value that a market bidder will pay for the asset today. A value bid would consider the cost, timing and risks of the development, the capital investment needed to complete any approved scheme (heritage build costs, consultant fees, ongoing security, void costs, finance costs at elevated rates since 2021) and the marketing period to sell or rent all units once converted.

“This could be a further three to five year project”. As part of the sale agreement the council negotiated a contractual position to secure any excess of value that might arise from any future development “if the quantum of development exceeded a certain level”.

When asked to elaborate on this, cabinet member for property, waste and infrastructure, Councillor Natalie Bramhall said the developers had spent £700,000 a year on empty rates, had to cover the cost of security, and that planning application costs would have been in excess of £1m.

She added that to get to the full £250m they would also need to spend ‘hundreds of millions’ to bring it forward. She said: “Residual land value with planning persimmon is between £35m and £40m.

“Somebody is going to have to spend hundreds of millions of pounds bringing that forward and I would suggest that as the purchaser is trying to sell at this time in the market which is probably at the bottom they spent far more on this site than they probably expected already. I actually think we secured a good deal and would again sell at that price.”

Image - former SCC HQ County Hall in Kingston. Surrey Live