

# Gove: meddling and muddled over Surrey Local Plans?

26 September 2023



**Michael Gove** is a Surrey MP and the Cabinet Minister in charge of housing and planning. The progress of Local Plans across the County are in disarray. Local Plans set the framework for each Surrey Borough's planning policies, including housing, for years to come. The Independent Leader of Spelthorne Council in Surrey has taken on Gove in a fierce letter exposing the muddle in the Central Government's position. The draft Local Plan for Epsom and Ewell has been paused. Emily Coady-Stemp reports:

The risk of flooding in Staines has been labelled a "major concern" by the council's leader, as she has hit back at a government intervention in planning for homes in the borough.

A last-minute intervention ahead of a key meeting this month saw a letter sent to the council saying **Michael Gove** directed the council not to withdraw its local plan.

The council nonetheless voted to pause its plan again, a move since approved by the government inspector allocated to it, and a response has been sent to the housing minister.

Councillor Joanne Sexton (Independent Spelthorne Group, Ashford East) said the authority, where she became leader after local elections in May 2023, had been preparing its plan for 9,000 homes in the borough through "an unprecedented period of instability in the planning system".

She said during this time "major reforms" were being proposed by central government "which seem to change with the wind".

Her letter to housing minister Rachel Maclean said the option of withdrawing the local plan was put forward at a meeting of the full council on Thursday September 14 because this may be a quicker way to get a plan through, rather than carry on with examination of the current draft.

Hearings into the plan started in May this year, but were paused in June while the council brought new members up to speed. Opening hearings heard concerns about the impact that putting more than half of the new planned homes in Staines would have on the market town.

Cllr Sexton said in her letter: "I, along with local members, also have a major concern in relation to potential flood risk in Staines which is where over 50 per cent of our new homes are planned to be provided." She said an outstanding statement of common ground from the Environment Agency on flooding concerns could still end up being "a key issue of soundness", the term inspectors use to say if they think a plan will or won't work. She also asked why a timeline for policy changes that are due from central government has still not been published.

Cllr Sexton attached a list of more than 60 local planning authorities that have now paused or withdrawn their local plans "as a result of this chaos and mixed messaging". She asked if the minister was "mistaken" when she declared in her letter that Spelthorne would be left with one of the oldest local plans in the country and highlighted other areas where the Secretary of State had not intervened, including in Basildon and Castle Point.

On Spelthorne not being left with one of the oldest plans in the country, Cllr Sexton asked: "If you concede this point, does it follow that you should rescind the intervention or is it your intention to intervene in the other councils with plans older than 2009?"

The local plan is the latest in Surrey to run into issues, with Tandridge set to put an end to its plan despite having spent £3.5m on it, and having first submitted it to government in 2019.

Cllr Sexton "took issue" with the last-minute nature of the letter from government, which came less than four hours before the meeting took place. She said: "This is completely unreasonable and unacceptable. At the very least you could have formally advised us earlier that you were minded to intervene so that we would have had the opportunity to understand and respond to your concerns ahead of the council meeting."

She said the council would seek further legal advice on the intervention, and would send a "more detailed formal response" on the intervention in due course.

Referring to what she called a "total disparity" in the approach, Cllr Sexton also referred to a letter sent in April to Kwasi Kwarteng, Spelthorne's MP.

In that letter, Ms Maclean said the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was unable to discuss the details of Spelthorne's plan in order for the examination of the plan to "remain fully independent".

Cllr Sexton said: "You are saying that you are unable to discuss the plan, but can unceremoniously intervene and stop the council deciding their own fate regarding the plan? Can you please explain the total disparity here?"

In his response agreeing to a further pause, the inspector, Jameson Bridgwater, asked the council to address issues he had raised at the hearings “in particular flood risk and its potential implications” on sites where homes may be built.

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Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

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Spelthorne’s neediest lose out on housing

Motion to pause Local Plan process (Epsom and Ewell)

Image: Joanne Sexton Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, (Ashford East), at the council building in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp and Michael Gove.

## Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

26 September 2023



A land scam, £3.5million spent and residents being “ignored” have come to a head as a district council finally looks set to call an end to its 6,000-home local plan.

As well as uneven development between the north and south of Tandridge, councillors raised concerns about the draft plan not looking enough at necessary infrastructure.

After a drawn-out process including hearings in public, the abandoned garden village planned for Godstone and terse public exchanges with the government’s planning inspector, the council’s leader declared the plan “dead”.

A meeting of the district council’s planning policy committee on Thursday (September 21) decided to ask the inspector for a final report, despite an additional bill of around £12,000, rather than withdrawing the plan.

Of the options in front of members, the council’s leader said: “In either case, the plan is dead.”

The inspector told the council in July he did not “see a route to soundness for the local plan”, but at a meeting after that the council put forward options to find a way forward.

The local plan, which set out where and when homes will be built across the district until 2033, was submitted to government for examination in January 2019.

There was a change of administration in May 2021, when a minority administration of residents’ associations took control of the council.

The current leader, Councillor Catherine Sayer (Residents’ Alliance, Oxted North and Tandridge), said she thought the local plan system was “totally unfit for purpose”.

With a government funding bid for works to improve junction 6 of the M25 failing, central to the plans for a new garden village, she said there was “a big question mark over why the planning inspector did not end the process at that point”.

Cllr Sayer told the meeting: “In an attempt to avoid ending up with no plan at all and the threat that would mean to the green belt together with a huge waste of taxpayers’ money, we tried to salvage something.

“We proposed amendments and deleted the garden community and attempted to do whatever else the planning inspector had indicated might make the plan acceptable.”

The leader also told the meeting it was “common knowledge” that some of the green belt land planned for the garden community had been part of a land scam where more than 350 small plots were sold on an investment basis.

She said: “Most of the owners are believed to reside in India and Pakistan. To enable the garden community to go ahead, it would have been likely that the council would have needed to use its compulsory purchase powers to assemble the land.”

She said asking for a report from the inspector could “bring some kind of useful closure to what is such an unhappy and costly chapter for Tandridge District”.

Councillor Jeremy Pursehouse (Independent, Warlingham East Chelsham & Farleigh) said he was “very sad to see the demise of the garden community” which he said balanced out planned development across the north and the south of district. He said: “We can’t put everything in Warlingham and Caterham, it just doesn’t work like that. It will just make people who are living in suburban areas further away from the green of the countryside, we have to share these things around.”

He said the north of the district did not have the infrastructure for the kinds of development being looked at in the plan.

Councillor Mick Gillman (Residents' Alliance, Burstow, Horne & Outwood) said he lived in the south of the district, which did not have the railways of the north, and described the A22 as "a car park much of the time". He added: "It's driven by infrastructure, and you've got to put a lot of money into the infrastructure in the south to get it up to speed."

But he also highlighted his reasons he thought it was important to get a report from the inspector.

Cllr Gillman said the council owed it to residents to justify why more than £3.5m had been spent on "something that has failed". He added: "What's even more concerning to me is many of the reasons that the inspector flagged up were those that were flagged up by residents in the consultation process and they were ignored. And I think residents need to know that they did not get it wrong, and it was the organisation within the council that got it wrong."

The meeting unanimously agreed to ask the inspector for a report, rather than withdrawing the plan, and will recommend this to council. Full council will debate the next steps for the plan, its next scheduled meeting is on Thursday, October 19.

Photo: Catherine Sayer Tandridge District Council leader. Image credit Darren Pepe/Surrey Live.

## Gove flexing his muscle on a Local Plan?

26 September 2023



A last-minute intervention from **Michael Gove** continued the uncertainty around the Surrey Borough Council of **Spelthorne's** plan for 9,000 new homes. The **Surrey Heath MP** ordered the council not to pause its local plan, in a letter sent by the housing and planning minister, limiting Spelthorne's options at a crucial meeting.

After what the council's chief executive described as an urgent ministerial meeting at 3pm on Thursday (September 15), a letter was sent to the council's leader setting out Mr Gove's intentions.

An extraordinary meeting of the council on the same day was set to vote on the options to continue with the plan, keep it on pause, or withdraw it altogether. The plan has been on pause since councillors asked the government inspector for a hiatus in June, after hearings had started at the end of May.

The letter from MP **Rachael Maclean** stated Mr Gove had legal powers to intervene if necessary if he thought an authority was "failing or omitting to do anything it is necessary to do" regarding preparing, revising or adopting its local plan.

While the chamber was told voting to withdraw its plan, outlining where new homes will be built in the borough up to 2037, was no longer a lawful action, councillors ultimately voted to extend the pause on the plan.

They also voted to seek further legal advice to "confirm the validity of the minister's directive".

The council voted by 20 votes to 16 to extend the pause, pending the publication of changes to national policy, due this autumn.

The council's leader, Councillor **Joanne Sexton** (Independent Spelthorne Group, Ashford East) said the council would seek further clarification from Mr Gove on the reasons behind the direction. She added: "We will endeavour, in the name of democracy, that we will produce a plan benefiting the residents of Spelthorne by the government's deadline of June 2025."

Cllr Sexton said unresolved flood issues in Staines, a plan that delivered "beautiful places" and with the "communities at the heart of it" were some of the concerns and reasons behind the plan that would be made clear to the government.

The question of the cost to the council of seeking further legal advice was also raised. Councillor **Karen Howkins** (Conservative, Laleham and Shepperton Green) asked how much money further legal advice relating to the local plan would cost. She asked: "Haven't we spent enough on legal advice regarding the local plan, haven't we wasted enough money? Isn't it time that we stopped wasting money that we haven't got?"

Officers confirmed the cost of further legal advice should be "not more" than £2,000.

While other councillors raised the "cost to the local community" both of putting through the "wrong plan" or of further delays.

The current draft plan allocates more than 5,400 of the borough's 9,270 new homes to be built in Staines.

Councillor **Howard Williams** (Independent Spelthorne Group, Staines) said of the council's plans to pause its own house building projects indefinitely that it impacted around a third of the flats planned for Staines. The current plan did not protect the green belt, he said, did "nothing" to deliver affordable or social housing and included more than 5,000 flats be built where they were "likely to flood".

He asked the meeting: “If we stick to the current targets of building 9,000 flats, where are all the flats that can’t now be built in Staines going to go instead? Sunbury, Stanwell, Ashford, Shepperton? They will all have to be built in other towns in the borough. So setting unrealistic targets for Staines does not protect other people’s towns or the green belt. That is a fallacy.”

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## Spelthorne’s neediest lose out on housing

26 September 2023



“Those who need it most” will be the people who suffer most from a council’s plans to abandon its home building projects, according to one councillor.

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Spelthorne is a Surrey Borough and its main town is Staines-Upon-Thames. Epsom and Ewell Times occasionally publishes reports about other Surrey districts as they enlighten issues all Councils can face and contrast with experience in the Borough of Epsom and Ewell.

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Rising interest rates adding £360million to the cost of developments, increased construction costs and reduced building heights have all contributed to the shelving of the council’s projects.

It means **Spelthorne Borough Council** is likely to halt projects to provide affordable and social housing and homes for key workers in the borough, where there are nearly 4,000 people on the housing register.

The authority had plans for developments at Oast House and Thameside House in Staines, as well as at the White House in Ashford and Benwell House in Sunbury.

Those developments will now be stopped “to protect the council” from the increased costs.

Meeting documents show the council’s group leaders had decided it was not appropriate for the council to “directly bear the risk and additional financial exposure” from increased borrowing to deliver the schemes.

Ashford North and Stanwell South Councillor Sean Beatty (Labour) said his ward was not only one of the poorest in the borough, but in the whole county. He described it as “extremely galling” that whether in the short, medium, or long term the people who would suffer would be those who needed housing.

Cllr Beatty told a meeting of the council’s corporate policy and resources committee on Monday (September 11) that the only people that would build social housing would be the council. He added that in his experience “very, very rarely” would private providers build social housing. He told the meeting: “It really concerns me that the people in Spelthorne who need it the most, are the ones that are going to suffer the most.”

The council will look at various options for the planned schemes, which could include selling the sites or progressing them with other providers. But councillors were warned that the less risk the council took on in each development, in handing over to a private developer, the less control they would have about how the final projects turned out.

Councillor Howard Williams (Independent Spelthorne Group, Staines) questioned how the council should approach the issue. He said: “I don’t think the residents of Staines would be very impressed if we sold the Oast House site to a developer only on the basis that they can shove 15-storey buildings in there and we walk away with the least cost to ourselves.”

Councillors heard it was unlikely to be a “one size fits all” approach, and each site would be looked at in detail, to have options presented to the committee and to council. But the authority’s chief accountant, Paul Taylor, gave a stark warning about the rising interest rates on government-backed loans, as well as the lower heights of projects going through the planning stages that he said had wiped £70million of revenue out. He told councillors: “We must take action now to protect the council.”

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Spelthorne’s thorny property problems spelt out

# Not such a rosy report on Surrey Fire Service

26 September 2023



Earlier today Epsom and Ewell Times published a press release clearly attributed to Surrey County Council. Below is a report from our BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service partner which casts a somewhat different light on the presentation of the Report by Surrey County Council.

Surrey's Fire and Rescue Service "needs to do more" to prepare and train for incidents in tall buildings, such as in the Grenfell tragedy, according to inspectors.

In a report released on Wednesday (September 13) inspectors gave a "requires improvement" rating to seven areas they looked at, with three areas rated "adequate" and one rated "good".

**Roy Wilsher's** report said he was satisfied with some aspects of the service's performance in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks, but said improvement was needed in some areas.

He said: "Given the nature of some of the problems we have identified, we will keep in close contact with the service to monitor its progress."

The fire and rescue service was given a requires improvement rating in the areas of preventing fire and risk, responding to fires and emergencies, best use of resources and promoting fairness and diversity, among others.

The report sets out that Surrey's fire and rescue service covers an area of 645 square miles and 1.2 million people.

An action plan will look at areas for improvement

Surrey Fire and Rescue Service said it was bringing together an "improvement plan" to address all areas for improvement highlighted in the report.

Chief fire officer **Dan Quin** said: "We know that there are areas where we can still improve and we will address these issues as a priority. While we had expected a more positive outcome in certain areas we recognise the benefits of an independent inspectorate. This is an opportunity for us to re-evaluate our current programmes and strategies. Our aim is to address the recommendations and further improve our services.

"I would like to thank the inspectors for taking the time to learn about our work, for their recommendations and for holding us to account. We remain committed to becoming an outstanding service as we continue to put our communities first."

Inspector 'disappointed' with tall building policies and procedures

Under the category of responding to major and multi-agency incidents, Mr Wilsher rated the service "requires improvement".

He said the service needed to do more to "prepare and train for incidents in tall buildings", such as the Grenfell Tower tragedy in which 72 people died in Kensington in 2017. He said only a "limited amount" of realistic training and exercising at tall buildings had been done, and that it hadn't included all staff groups that would be expected to respond to such an incident.

Mr Wilsher's report said: "We were disappointed to find that the service had only developed a limited number of policies and procedures for safely managing this type of incident. It has procedures in place detailing the role of the evacuation officer but no effective tall buildings evacuation policy for operational and control room staff. The service should address these policy gaps as a matter of urgency."

The inspection also saw a new "cause of concern" given, regarding the service not being able to accurately identify how many high-risk premises it has.

The inspector said within 28 days an action plan should be provided which would look at identifying the highest risk premises and making sure all staff were aware of expectations of them.

What has improved?

While Mr Wilsher did say inspectors were "disappointed" more progress hadn't been made since a 2021 inspection, he did say there had been "significant change" in the leadership team as well as the transfer of some workforce to London Fire Brigade last year.

The only area rated "good" was "promoting the right values and culture". According to the report: "We were encouraged by the cultural improvements the service has made. The service is displaying more visible leadership, and the area for improvement we described during our last inspection has been discharged."

He added there was a “clear commitment” from staff and leaders to improve, with “some good foundations in place” but said it was “important the service gains momentum and moves forward”.

As well as that, Mr Wilsher said SFRS had good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents, helping keep them safe during and after incidents. This was under a “requires improvement” rating for the “responding to fires and other emergencies” part of the inspection.

Mr Quin said: “I am extremely proud of the hard work happening across our service and want to thank all of our team for playing their part. As a service we are committed to creating a fully inclusive workplace where everybody feels supported. The improvement of the service’s culture was a priority for all staff, so we are delighted to see these efforts recognised.”

The full breakdown of services in each category is as follows:

Good: Promoting values and culture

Adequate: Understanding fire and risk, future affordability, right people, right skills

Requires improvement: Preventing fire and risk, public safety through fire regulation, responding to fires and emergencies, responding to major incidents, best use of resources, promoting fairness and diversity, managing performance and developing leaders

Inadequate: None

Related report:

Surrey Fire service praised

## Independent Surrey SEND school slammed

26 September 2023



A “culture of discrimination and inequality” goes unaddressed at a school for children with additional needs, where pupils “fear reprisals” from some senior staff if they report concerns, according to Ofsted inspectors.

An inspection into the independent school was requested “as promptly as possible” by the Department for Education, following complaints from parents.

Inspectors described a “negative culture” across staff, pupils and parents at the school, pupils subject to “racial and homophobic slurs and sexualised language and behaviours” and leaders not showing the “capacity to lead and improve the school”.

Their findings rated **Wemms Education Centre**, in Long Ditton, inadequate overall and in the areas of behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management, in a report published on Tuesday (September 12).

The quality of education at the school and its sixth form provision were both rated “good”, and inspectors said teachers were clear about what they wanted pupils to learn and how, with curriculum leaders having “expert subject knowledge”.

But inspectors said leaders’ understanding of safeguarding was “weak”, without a shared understanding of what constituted a “serious concern”. Their report said: “Consequently, referrals to other agencies have been too slow, meaning that pupils are placed at risk of harm. Furthermore, senior leaders are not clear about who the most vulnerable pupils in school are.”

Speaking after the report was published Wemms chief executive, **Duncan Murphy**, told the LDRS the report did “not mirror other external reviews of life at Wemms” but accepted that growth has not come without its challenges. He said: “It is no secret that the school challenged some areas of the report; now that it has been published, it is important that we focus on what matters the most – being a school that reflects, learns and ensures that every child has the best possible experience under our tutelage.

“In order to achieve this, we have put together a comprehensive action plan outlining active steps we are taking to amplify our strengths and target areas of improvement. Trustees have added additional capacity to the leadership team, and it is also our aim to diversify and professionalise governance so that there is greater rigour and accountability throughout.”

According to inspectors, “strong work” done at the school was “sullied by a culture of discrimination and inequality that goes unaddressed”.

Pupils at the school are those who have been “unable to cope in mainstream education” and typically have social, emotional and mental health needs with almost all having an education, health and care plan in place.

Inspectors said: “Too many pupils do not feel happy or safe at school. They are fearful of the bullying behaviour of other

pupils, which goes unaddressed. During inspection, pupils, staff and parents spoke of the negative impact on pupils of racial and homophobic slurs, inappropriate sexualised language and behaviours. Pupils trust only some adults in school to help them. Many pupils fear a lack of empathy, even reprisals, from certain leaders should they report a concern.”

The Ofsted report said pupils believed they were treated “inconsistently and unfairly” and as such “a culture of intimidation, mistrust and fear abounds”.

Six action points were set out by inspectors for the school, with fees of £50,000 per year, to improve.

Inspectors described relationships within and between all groups of staff as “severely flawed” and said the school was a “deeply fractured community”. They said there was a “a widespread lack of trust and confidence” in the school’s leadership and that parents too were “deeply divided” in their views of the school, particularly its leadership.

According to the Wemms website, the school was “proud to declare itself a ‘marmite’ school... you will love us or hate us”. It said: “Our school is for individuals and mavericks who yearn for a bespoke education, which allows them to learn in their own way and at their own pace.”

With parents able to write to the inspectors as part of the process, the Ofsted report said positive and negative opinions were equally received, and a smaller number wrote with neutral views.

Three quarters of parents who completed Ofsted’s online survey said they would recommend the school, but common themes were raised regarding “unsupportive behaviour towards pupils and parents, particularly regarding the management of concerns”.

Less than a quarter of staff who completed a survey said that the school was well led and managed, and only one third believed they were treated fairly and with respect.

But inspectors said around two thirds remained happy to work at the school and believed leaders were considerate of their workload.

Inspectors said: “A negative culture pervades the school and permeates across staff, pupil and parent groups. Some staff, parents and pupils are wary of leaders and feel unable to air their views or concerns. “Leaders should take urgent action to ensure that members of the school community are able to express their views without fear of reprisals. Leaders should work to establish a positive, shared school ethos.” As well as this, there were concerns that leaders’ responses to pupils’ breaking the rules were “inconsistent and unfair” and that sanctions were not applied consistently.

The report said: “Inspectors heard repeatedly from staff, pupils and parents that pupils are not kept safe from bullying and abuse, including the use of racial and homophobic slurs and sexualised language and behaviours.”

They added that there were no established strategies to address these behaviours and that behaviour and anti-bullying policies were not effectively implemented.

The school’s nurse left the organisation during the course of the inspection in May as a result of her concerns, put in writing to the school in March 2023, relating to safeguarding, medication, staff training and a lack of autonomy to practise as a school nurse.

Staff, pupils and parents also raised concerns about the school’s response to pupils’ medical needs.

What does the school do well?

Inspectors said the pupils’ experiences at the school varied widely, and that the move from a site in Leatherhead to Long Ditton in 2022 had “proved popular”.

They said the pupils generally behaved well in lessons, whether working individually or in twos with a teacher and that there was “high academic ambition” across the school.

The report added: “Pupils achieve strongly across a range of subjects, frequently beyond their own and their family’s expectations. Older pupils learn to drive, helping them to be prepared for their futures. However, these successes are not mirrored in other aspects of school life.”

The LDRS understands some parents do not support the inspector’s findings and are looking into lodging a formal complaint about the Ofsted report. One parent said the school had been a “life changer” for their family.

How the school responded

**Duncan Murphy**, chief executive of Wemms Education Centre, said the school had a “proud history of supporting children with complex and challenging needs” and two positive previous inspections were the reason for moving to the bigger site.

He said the report did not mirror other external reviews of the school, but added that the school “wholly accept and understand that growth has not come without its challenges”.

With the school having challenged aspects of the report, he also pointed to pupils who “achieve strongly” and that many parents would be happy to recommend the school to others.

Mr Murphy said: “However, there have rightly been questions of consistency which we will seek to address with pace and purpose as we build for the future.”

The school would focus on being one that would reflect, learn and ensure that every child at Wemms had “the best possible experience”, he added.

With an action plan outlining steps being taken, as well as changes to governance for “greater rigour and accountability throughout”, Mr Murphy also said concerns regarding discrimination and inequality were being tackled.

He added: “We firmly believe that our community can once more be united behind a shared vision of excellence for those

pupils who need a school like ours the most. It is a source of great regret to us that the essence of this aim has been misplaced since the move to a new site last year, but now is an opportunity to drive improvement and ensure a long and successful future for our school and its community.”

## School transport early term teething problems

26 September 2023



Families have been left without school transport for the start of term despite **Surrey County Council** promising to “learn lessons” after pupils were left stranded last year.

One parent of a 19-year-old with severe learning difficulties said she “stopped mentioning” going back to school to her son once she realised transport probably wouldn’t be in place in time for the start of term.

**Georgie Morris** said her son, Greg, missed the first four days of his school term, but has now had confirmation that he will be able to get to school on Monday (September 11).

She first had transport approved for Greg, who has a placement at a New Malden college which is the nearest suitable place for him, in June.

But having waited through the summer for details to be confirmed she claims she was told the day before Greg was due to go back on September 5 that there was no transport in place.

Having spoken to someone at the county council on Thursday, September 7, Georgie then had Greg’s transport confirmed.

Despite some families not having transport sorted for the start of the new term Surrey County Council bosses say “significant improvements” have been made since last year but admitted there were issues with finding providers for a small number of children who require specialist provision due to their needs.

There are also more than 350 applications waiting for travel arrangements, but a council spokesperson explained these were from 544 applications made in August. So far more than 170 have been dealt with, with the remaining ones on track to be assessed within the 30 day timescales.

But she said Greg, who is non-verbal, has severe learning difficulties and global developmental delay, is bored at home, and needs the stimulation school brings.

She said: “I tell him ‘It’s so many sleeps until school’, so he was geared up to go to school. Once I realised this wasn’t going to happen, I just stopped mentioning it, we just carried on with the holidays.”

She couldn’t drive Greg from her Dorking home to the college, saying she doesn’t always have access to the car, and it would be too stressful for her. But once she had the transport confirmed, she said she “instantly felt okay”.

Georgie told the LDRS: “I’m lucky in the fact that I can chase and I’ve got the wherewithal to kick up a stink and to get things done, but a lot of these parents don’t.”

She worried about other parents, some of whom may have additional needs themselves, or might not know where to turn.

While she’s sympathetic with staff at the council who have a “very difficult” job to do, she said better accountability and communication were needed.

A county council spokesperson said: “There is a small cohort of children who require specialist provision for high and/or complex medical needs that, due to a lack of suitable providers, are waiting for appropriate arrangements. “We are in direct contact with these families and are actively working with them to find a solution. Measures such as personal travel allowances have been offered in the short-term.”

In May, councillors were warned that the county council needed to tackle a £12million overspend on school transport “to avoid adversely impacting services”.

A review following issues at the start of the 2022 school year led to 50 recommendations for the authority, as councillors heard that families were turning to food banks in the face of delays and suffering an impact on their mental health.

Councillor **Clare Curran**, cabinet member for education and learning, told a select committee meeting in December she didn’t “underestimate” the task at hand, but was “confident” that by this September families wouldn’t “suffer the failure” of the 2022 start to the year.

A council spokesperson told the LDRS this week: “Significant improvements have been made regarding the assessment and planning of families’ transport arrangements, and addressing the challenges faced previously. We are not currently

experiencing any application or travel delivery backlogs, and across the last six months 95% of applications were assessed within our agreed timescales.

“All applications for home to school travel assistance received prior to 31 July were processed, and families had their travel arrangements communicated to them, before the start of the autumn term.”

Families with specific complaints and enquiries are urged to call the council’s Contact Centre on 0300 200 1004 so it can investigate.

Related reports:

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## Hampton Court ULEZ maze challenge

26 September 2023



The expansion of London’s Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) to the Surrey border affects attractions like Hampton Court Palace, some of which is on the charge boundary.

ULEZ, introduced by Transport for London to improve air quality in the capital, sees drivers of non-compliant cars charged to enter the area it covers.

Hampton Court Palace, located alongside the Thames and just over Hampton Court Bridge from Surrey is largely inside the new London ULEZ however some routes from its car park avoid charges.

The A308 towards Staines and the M3 forms the border of the ULEZ, meaning cars travelling along it are not passing into the zone.

Therefore non-compliant cars will not need to pay the daily charge of £12.50, and those driving to Hampton Court Palace will not be in the zone on entering the landmark’s car park.

However the exit from the palace’s car park is on the other side of the roundabout, where Hampton Court Road continues towards Kingston, and is just inside the charging zone.

According to a camera map on [ulez.co.uk](https://ulez.co.uk), the first camera on the A308 is further up the road, on the corner with Campbell Road.

This means drivers coming out of the car park and turning left to go back towards the roundabout, as they would need to, may not be caught entering the zone.

In response to a query on Twitter about driving to and from the palace in the newly-extended zone, Historic Royal Palaces said: “Hampton Court Palace and its car park are within ULEZ, however if you are driving from outside of London into our car park and back out again you will not be seen by the enforcement camera and will not be charged – provided you don’t re-enter the zone.”

A link was included to the TfL site to check whether or not a car meets the emissions standards, and would therefore need to pay the charge.



What would Henry VIII have made of a tax like the ULEZ charge?

in addition to non-Parliamentary “benevolences” he exacted from the wealthy he did impose a tax on all beards, except his own. So maybe the vagaries of ULEZ would have been to His liking.

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A Historic Royal Palaces spokesperson said: “Our priority is to continue to provide clear information for visitors, to inform the decisions they make about travel to and from Hampton Court Palace. We will continue to work with TfL to ensure that we provide the most up to date information on this.”

The ULEZ is in force 24 hours a day, midnight to midnight, every day of the year, except for Christmas Day.

According to TfL, nine out of ten cars seen driving in outer London already meet the ULEZ emissions standards.

Since its introduction, TfL said the ULEZ had already helped to reduce nitrogen dioxide pollution by nearly half in central London and by a fifth in inner London.

Several Surrey councils objected to the expansion of the zone, calling for a scrappage scheme to be extended to Surrey residents and for more exemptions.

Related reports:

Signs of Surrey resistance to ULEZ continue

London Mayor confirms drive of ULEZ to Epsom border. ULEZ explainer.

High Court gives ULEZ the green light to Epsom’s borders

ULEZ court challenge begins

ULEZ driving old cars to Epsom market

Challenge to ULEZ gaining grounds

Many Surrey motorists will be paying the ULEZ charge.

ULEZ Court battle looming

Image: Luke Nicolaides CC BY-SA 2.0

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## Objectors fail to tear a strip off

26 September 2023



An Epsom strip club has had its licence renewed despite dividing residents on what it brings to the town.

**Stir**, in the town centre’s East Street, has run as a sexual entertainment venue since 2011, though operations manager **Damon Wellman** has been running it as a bar since 2007.

Residents who wrote to the council about the application raised concerns about going into town late at night because of it, while another in support said the bar did not have the “creeps” you would find in other venues.

A licensing sub committee meeting at **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** on Thursday (August 24) granted renewal of the venue’s licence, which was due to expire.

**Stir** is Epsom and Ewell’s only establishment licenced as a sexual entertainment venue.

The sub committee considered six letters of support and four objections to the application, as well as hearing from Mr Wellman in the meeting.

Letters of support included one person who used to live very close to the venue, who said they were being followed home one night by three men having left another nearby pub. The letter said: “It was late and we had to walk past Stir bar so we asked the doormen if they could help and they were brilliant. “They let us stay in the bar for free, offered to call the police if the men stayed outside, which they did not, and then after some time walked us back to our flat. After that we would sometimes just go in there for a drink as it was a really nice bar and never had the creeps that we would encounter in other bars.”

But one objector said she would not go into town late at night because of the club, saying she had “seen the men coming

in and out” and felt “unsafe”.

Another person who wrote in support said they understood people’s “reservations to this sort of thing”, but added “it’s important that perceptions and prejudice do not take precedent over facts and reality.”

Another letter said the venue “tainted” the town, raising concerns about it being so close to a nursery and to a residential area. They went on to say: “I write to and on behalf of the young women who walk home late at night and ask you to reconsider your renewal and shut the premise down and protect young adults from these dangers.”

While another letter claimed there had been a “significant increase in anti-social behaviour associated with the establishment”, Mr Wellman disputed this in the meeting.

He produced a response to a Freedom of Information request he had submitted to the council regarding complaints, whether noise or otherwise, about the premises which said there had been none in the last five years.

Mr Wellman said: “We have to run a venue like this strictly. That’s why we have a great reputation. We are phenomenally strict. We are very strict on who we let in. We’re not a volume-led venue, this industry generally isn’t.”

The licence was granted, with minor changes including removing the words “female only” from a condition regarding the locations where “exotic dancing” could take place.

## Guildford contemplates financial “Armageddon”.

26 September 2023



Guildford’s task to avoid issuing a bankruptcy notice requires “urgent” attention and councillors are branding the local council’s problems a “wake up call” – here’s everything we learned from a series of key meetings this week.

**Guildford Borough Council** is working to address its £300million of borrowing and an £18.3m projected deficit over three years.

Two crucial meetings this week have seen officers set out plans to combat rising costs of borrowing, in a situation compounded by an accounting error which made it look like the council had more in reserves than it did.

In March, the discovery of a £10m accounting error, along with other issues, led to a prediction that at the end of March 2024, the council would have £8.5m in its reserves. This was compared with a reported £32m in February 2023 when the budget for the year was signed off.

Below, the LDRS breaks down some of the key points from a meeting of the council’s corporate governance and standards committee on Tuesday (July 18) and its executive on Thursday (July 20).

### Why are reserves so important?

Reserves are effectively a council’s savings, and may be used to balance a council’s budget when money coming in does not cover the money going out.

The drop in the expected reserves at Guildford is a large part of the problem, which could lead to the issuing of a **section 114 notice** at the borough council, effectively declaring itself bankrupt and stopping all non-essential spending.

Guildford’s executive head of finance told Tuesday’s meeting there is no legally required level of reserves that councils should maintain, but it came down to a “risk-based evaluation” of what he thought the council would need.

**Peter Vickers** said: “If an Armageddon happened and we got nothing in financially for a month or two, we still have to pay creditors etc. How much money do we really need? So it’s a risk assessment.”

The lead councillor for finance and property said in Tuesday’s meeting the problem for the council was not about cash flow but about servicing its debt, with borrowing costs “ballooning” and the council unable to afford them.

Councillor **Richard Lucas** (Lib Dem, Ash Vale) said the council was trying to avoid a section 114 notice, which could still come around in October when a new medium term financial strategy will be brought to the council. He said: “We will not deal with this by pretending there is no problem.”

### What are the council’s options?

The council will look at all the assets it has available, and work out which could be sold off, with Cllr Lucas saying each asset would be reviewed in terms of how much net income they bring in and how much they could be sold for.

The council’s former leader, Cllr **Joss Bigmore** (Residents for Guildford and Villages, Merrow), raised concerns in

Tuesday's meeting that officers were painting "too negative a picture" in conflating issues linked to the authority's council housing and general spending. He told officers: "If that's because you want to focus our minds, it's worked. But I don't think it's fair. I think this is slightly muddled."

Cllr Bigmore said the council had strong options for capital assets it could sell off, that would not be done as a "fire sale" but would be about choosing to sell certain investments in favour of others that may be more profitable. He added: "We have a lot of options. It will be a colossal failure of this council if we have to issue a section 114 in October, because we have options."

"We're not a Woking. There are a lot of things we can do between now and then. So I have every confidence, if we work together we can do it."

Other plans laid out by officers include "strict controls" on new spending, and the creation of a dedicated financial task force at a cost of £2m.

Mr Vickers confirmed no council housing would be sold off as part of the measures.

### Who could be affected?

Councillors raised concerns about the impact on residents if services were to be cut, and particularly in the event of a section 114 notice being issued.

Residents in Croydon have seen a 15 per cent increase in their council tax after the issuing of a section 114 notice there, and neighbouring Woking is currently consulting its residents on which services they would like to see prioritised amid warnings up to 350 staff could be made redundant.

Mr Vickers said on Tuesday the council had to "focus on the vulnerable".

With a legal obligation to protect the essential services that the council delivers, he said: "It's not as simple as saying we're just not going to spend money. We don't get that option to be frank."

While he said he did not want to prejudge what may be coming down the line, Councillor **Bob Hughes** (Conservative, Tillingbourne) said: "This is something that's going to affect everybody in this borough. People will lose services, there are going to be problems, there could even be, as has happened at some other councils, large increases in council tax."

### What happens next?

Though the increased costs of the Ash road bridge and the 1,500 home **Weyside Urban Village** were put forward by officers as contributing to the problems, for the bridge at least, the cost of stopping would be the same as to continue on.

Cllr Lucas said the same was true for a key part of the Weyside Urban Village project in relocating a Thames Water sewage works, but that the overall project was likely to see changes down the line.

He said borrowing costs on the project would "balloon" after the point the medium term financial plan is set to look at, but councillors will be looking at the longer-term implications for the plan in due course.

At a meeting on Tuesday July 25, all councillors will debate the officers' action plan for turning things around.

Cllr **George Potter** (Lib Dem, Burpham) called the recommendations being made a "wake up call" on the "crisis" the council found itself in. He said: "I'm really pleased with the transparency we're showing here, with the fact that we are putting as much as we possibly can in the public domain. We're being very frank and honest about the seriousness of this situation and we are being very clear about the scale of a challenge, and very clear about the scale of what might need to be done in order to deal with it."

Related Reports:

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Image: Weyside Urban Village. GBC/JTP design and access statement.