

Surrey's flood defences and energy efficiency funding

8 February 2025



Funding for Surrey's climate change programme has been reinstated after the county council received £1.5m more in government grants than it was expecting.

Surrey's Greener Future's programme is a climate change strategy that aims to reduce carbon emissions and make the county net-zero by 2050. Budget details had initially proposed to slash £0.5m from the Greener Future's spreadsheet, as part of Surrey County Council's identified £66.4m cuts it needs to make in 2025/26.

But the cuts will now be reversed after an amendment put forward by the Residents' Association/Independents and the Green Party. Members unanimously agreed to the proposed changes to the budget at a full council meeting on February 4.

Cllr Catherine Powell said in the meeting: "Younger residents want a long-term focus which I don't believe this budget fully supports." The Independent member for Farnham Residents said the funds will safeguard the "vital work on developing and embedding climate adaptation".

Money reinvested back into the Greener Futures team can be used to develop and integrate climate adaptation policies such as flood defences, heat avoidance, and programmes to improve household energy efficiency. It also includes developing finance opportunities like natural capital and organising health initiatives.

Cllr Jonathan Essex (Green Party/ Redhill East), who initiated the amendment, said: "Now is the time to strengthen and extend, not water down, climate action across Surrey, so I am delighted that we have taken this step to continue tackling the climate emergency.

"Leadership by local councils, including here in Surrey, is vital to ensure that the health of the economy is defined by community well-being and sustainable living, not by growth at all costs."

Cllr Powell added: "I firmly believe that climate change is not only real, but impacting Surrey and our residents and our businesses today." She cited the multiple instances of flooding across Surrey last year which the Environmental Agency said would only happen once every 30 years in normal condition.

The agreed change was just one of five amendments the Green Party put forward to change the council's budget, the rest were rejected. The others included creating a voluntary contribution fund for early intervention children services, closing the Your Fund Surrey programme, putting a transport scheme on hold and committing to a cross-party working group for SEND needs.

View from Little Misley, one of the fields set to have solar panels. (Credit: Guildford Borough Council planning documents)

Surrey mansion tax debated at County Council

8 February 2025



Plans for 'those with the broadest shoulders' to voluntarily pay more council tax to help those in need have been labelled 'morally corrupt' in a heated debate. The idea is based on a scheme introduced by Westminster Council in 2018, dubbed a "mansion tax".

Council Tax is based on the property value of a house if it was sold in April 1991 in England. For instance, Band H is for

properties valued at over £320,000. But with the average house price in Surrey today at just over £600k, according to Rightmove, councillors agreed the council tax system needs reform.

Paul Follows, Liberal Democrat group leader, put forward an idea to ask residents in Band H if they would be willing to pay more money to support essential services and those in need. He asked the county council to “explore the creation of a voluntary contribution scheme” for those in the highest bracket of council tax.

But the Lib Dem’s amendment to the budget was lambasted by councillors at a full council meeting on February 4. Members voted against proposal 43 against, 25 in favour and six abstentions.

Brandishing the proposal as “morally corrupt”, Cllr Ernest Mallett MBE (Residents’ Association and Independents/ West Molesey) argued many people, like himself, support charities which try to combat poverty. He said that for Cllr Follows to suggest a council with a £2bn turnover should attempt to “levy funds from residents” is “totally immoral” and “unjustified”.

The suggestion was tabled as an amendment to Surrey’s budget for 2025/26 at a full council meeting on February 4. Residents living in a Band H property will be facing a council tax bill of over £3,690 this year as the council’s budget was approved.

Not a concrete plan, Cllr Follows proposed a cross-party working group would be created to flesh out the scheme’s scope and structure. Then the designs would be brought back to council for consideration for the next financial year. He said: “It does not cost us a lot of money to try, and we may help a lot of people if we do.”

Cllr Mark Nuti (Conservative/ Chertsey) said it was “an affront” to the people of Surrey who are generous with their time and money in the voluntary sector and philanthropic investors in the community.

Council leader Tim Oliver agreed and said Surrey “already has one of the highest council tax bills in the country”. Cllr Oliver said members should focus more on local government reform rather than getting residents to pay extra.

Worried about the “unintended consequences” of the scheme, Cllr Denise Turner Steward (Conservative/ Staines South and Ashford West) said putting “moral pressure” on residents to pay more council tax to help others could “divert” funds away from much-needed charities in Surrey.

But not everyone shared the same view. “There is nothing iniquitous of asking those with more to consider voluntarily giving a little extra,” said Cllr George Potter (Lib Dem/Burpham). “If that bastion of socialism in Westminster can manage it, then surely middle of the road Surrey can certainly manage it.”

Other members took a more hard-line approach. “If you can afford a £3m or £4m house, you ain’t poor,” said Cllr Jan Mason (Residents’ Association/ West Ewell). “They know they are buying housing in an affluent area, they are able to pay.” She told the council many of the residents in her ward and it would be an “insult to my residents who are on really low income” if bigger council tax bands were not brought in.

Cllr Lance Spencer (Goldsworth East and Horsell Village), seconding the motion, said he understood not everyone in a Band H property would be able to contribute. However, the voluntary contribution could provide “an opportunity to make a significant impact to the county’s future” with the “further degradation of services realistically inevitable”.

Waverley Borough Council, where Cllr Follows is leader, has also sent a letter to residents asking for their thoughts on a proposal to introduce voluntary tax contributions to support projects and vulnerable residents across the borough.

Paul Follows speaking at full council meeting 4/02. (Credit: Surrey County Council live stream)

Political furies over Surrey election postponement

8 February 2025



Rival political parties are furious over the cancellation of Surrey’s 2025 county council elections, with groups claiming the ruling Conservatives are “running scared”.

The government announced on Wednesday (February 5) that it has accepted Surrey’s request to postpone the county council elections for May 2025 to the following year. The county is now set to be part of the government’s ‘first wave’ of simplifying and streamlining local authorities.

Specifics of how Surrey will be governed are still yet to be carved out but it could involve either a single mega authority with an elected mayor, or two to three smaller regions.

The news comes much to the despair of some political parties. Liberal Democrats and the Green Party saw a surging level of support in Surrey district and borough council elections last year and they were hoping to repeat the same success at a

county-level.

Surrey MPs have reacted to the cancellation, with newly-elected Liberal Democrats claiming the “Conservative-led Surrey Council has denied local residents their voice”.

A joint statement from the Lib Dem MPs in Surrey and the group leader read: “It is clear that the Conservatives are running scared and have succeeded in stopping these elections from happening in May, in a desperate attempt to cover up their own abysmal record.

“Meanwhile, the Labour Government has stood by and done nothing, knowing they can’t win in Surrey.

“Voters are rightly fed up with this Conservative council and years of financial mismanagement. From endless potholes, to cutting local frontline services, to letting down thousands of children with special educational needs and much more, its record speaks for itself.”

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, welcomed the decision to postpone the elections to allow for “detailed work for reorganisation” to begin while supporting residents. The Conservative member asserted that devolution is in the “best interest” of residents and businesses.

Meanwhile, the Green Party reacted with anger to the news. Cllr Jonathan Essex (Redhill East) said: “Our fragile democracy can’t afford to ignore the people’s right to vote.” He said: “The local Conservatives have forfeited their right to represent the county as we face an uncertain future for local decision-making.”

The Greens said it would have stood more candidates than ever before at the Surrey County Council elections as the party has been growing in popularity. Cllr Essex said: “People should have a real choice between the failed Tory and Labour parties [...] The real aim of so-called ‘devolution’ is quite the opposite: to move decision-making upwards to more unaccountable bodies.”

But Surrey’s two Labour county councillors said the delay was “good news for the people of Surrey”. The pair said the change will hand power from Westminster to local people with new powers and a better deal.

“Surrey County Council was formed in 1889 so the world is very different now,” Cllr Robert Evans (Spelthorne). The population of Surrey has more than doubled since Victorian times and much of what was Surrey then is now in London. The boroughs and districts were formed more than fifty years ago and don’t serve the same purpose as they might have done then.’

Cllr Robert King (Runnymede) added: “In Surrey we have a two tier system which means service delivery can be confusing. Add to that we have 12 headquarters, 12 chief executives, dozens of deputies and more than a thousand councillors. A top-heavy system of local government does not serve our communities as well as it should.”

Out of 16 local authorities which wrote to the government asking to postpone the May 2025 elections, only nine of the requests were accepted by Angela Raynor, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Other councils that sought a delay included Warwickshire, Devon, Leicestershire, Gloucestershire, Kent and Worcestershire, and Oxfordshire.

“Any party calling for these elections to go ahead must explain how this waste would be justifiable,” Ms Raynor said in her announcement to the House of Commons. She added: “We’re not in the business of holding elections to bodies that won’t exist and where we don’t know what will replace them. This would be an expensive and irresponsible waste of taxpayer’s money.”

Describing the need for creating a sustainable unitary local government for Surrey as “urgent”, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government said postponing the elections will help “speed up” reorganising local government and its benefits.

Tim Oliver Surrey County Council leader - Surrey Live

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Surrey Police hikes its Council tax share

8 February 2025



Surrey Police's share of council tax bills will leap over £335 a year for the average Band D households. Lisa Townsend, Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) said the 4.3 per cent increase was needed to "maintain the level of service".

Ms Townsend told the Surrey Police and Crime panel the government "absolutely expects" PCCs to raise council tax precepts by the maximum £14 to cover the police officer wage increase (set nationally) and inflation.

The annual charge will increase from £323.57 in 2024/25 for a Band D property to £337.57 in 2025/26.

The commissioner told the panel even with the precept increase and the use of some reserves, the Force will still need to find £3.6m of savings this year and over £15m for the three years after that.

Although the commissioner said Surrey Police is one of the fastest-improving forces in the country, she stressed the increase in funds was needed to "keep us where we are". Surrey Police has more than doubled its charge rate, with an additional 3,500 offences being prosecuted, according to the PCC. Ms Townsend told the panel the increase is "against a backdrop of a massive increase year on year which our financial resources can't keep up with".

Reports state the cost to operate the Force has increased by £23.2m compared to 2024/25, meaning Surrey Police have to make a saving of £3.6m this year. Ms Townsend argued if the precept was not increased, police services would have to be cut and "achievements would be at risk".

The news comes as 59 per cent of people said they would pay more to support Surrey police in the PCC's online survey. Over 3,200 people voted in the online consultation which asked them if they would be willing to pay an extra £1.16 a month to support policing teams, based on the average Band D property.

But members of the Surrey Police and Crime Panel voted against the proposed increase in a meeting on February 3. Four councillors opposed the tax hike, four were in favour and one person abstained- leaving the chair of the meeting to cast the deciding vote which was found to be against.

"There is no doubt that all members want to support the police," said Cllr John Robini, chair of the meeting. "However, we hear time and time again how our community is struggling with finances." Yet, there were not enough votes to veto the proposal and the panel accepted the Commissioner's precept of 4.3 per cent to come into effect.

Epsom and Ewell Times explainer: First vote on principle against the rise by a simple majority of votes cast, including the chair's. Second vote a legal requirement as vetoing the proposed increase requires a two-thirds majority under the rules and that special majority was not achieved.

"I've got people in my ward who can't afford to pay their bills and feed their kids," Cllr Richard Wilson said. "This squeeze above inflation is going to take more of their pay...and make it more difficult to support their families."

Raising the council tax above inflation levels (currently around 2.5 per cent), councillors questioned whether this was an acceptable strain on residents. Kelvin Menon, Chief Financial Officer for the PCC, said: "We have a lot of historic inflation we have to cope with and cover."

The PCC's report details recruiting officers can be a challenge with high living costs in Surrey, contributing to over 11 per cent of posts vacant. Increased use of technology by criminals has also led to a growing demand for technological forensic services, with almost all crimes having a digital element to them, according to the report.

Planning a house extension in Epsom and Ewell? A hard lesson from Waverley

8 February 2025



A man who was charged £70,000 by a Surrey council said it was a “watershed moment” to be given recognition of his struggle and the right to appeal. A couple were slammed with a hefty fee for a home extension and given no opportunity to argue their case.

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a legal charge designed to get developers to financially contribute towards essential infrastructure. While self-builders and home extensions are exempt from CIL payments, in Waverley applicants must first complete the necessary paperwork for this.

But with residents being unaware they need to apply for an exemption, or due to paperwork errors, some people have unexpectedly had to face extortionate CIL charges and terrifying enforcement action.

Steve and Caroline Dally were granted planning consent to demolish and replace an existing home extension that was exempt from CIL. However, after seeking permission to make some minor amendments (for which consent was granted) they suddenly and unexpectedly faced a £70,000 CIL charge, with no appeal.

Unlike in criminal cases, the paperwork and administrative processes of CIL means people could accidentally face charges between £40,000- £235,000 and have no right for their case to be reconsidered.

They pursue you relentlessly to get the money out of you,” said Steve Dally, “There’s no compassion, there’s no understanding.” He explained the council told him he had 60 days to pay the £70k or his home in Godalming was at risk of being re-possessed and he would go to prison. As this was the start of the Covid lockdown in 2020, he feared the worst.

The 65-year-old has been forced to increase the mortgage on his home by £400 per month, pending full repayment when he turns 70. He may have no choice but to sell the home he has worked his entire life for, just to settle this debt. “It’s traumatic,” Mr Dally said. “You lose sleep and end up crying your eyes out- what can you do about it?”

Fighting the council since 2020, Mr Dally had approached councillors and the local MP and the ombudsman to change the CIL charge levied against him and his wife. But none of them could ultimately remove the fee.

On Tuesday, January 28, **Waverley Borough Council** agreed to ensure the public have the right to appeal the CIL charges. Mr Dally described it as a “watershed” moment as it was the “first time that someone was prepared to stand up and fight for you”.

Speaking out for the victims, Councillor Lauren Atkins said the “Life-changing unintentional impacts of CIL have resulted in debt, depression and years of feeling unheard and being unanswered.” She called for the council to collaborate and seize the “opportunity to see justice for those wronged”.

But now, householders previously subject to CIL liability can request a discretionary review by Waverley Borough Council within a window from 1 June 2025 to 31 May 2026. The council agreed to have a discretionary review of CIL payments for householder applications and will consider refunds of CIL previously collected.

Mr Dally said the change did not guarantee victims were going to get their money back. “It’s a long way to go yet,” he said, arguing it depends on how “compassionate” the reviewer will be of people’s cases. “There will be a lot of people in Surrey that will be impacted by the same and will not know which way to turn.” he said.

Speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), Mr Dally reeled off other people who had been found foul of the CIL charge on their residential properties. He said one man was charged £200k and a wife looking after her husband with dementia was fined £40k.

Councillor Jane Austin said: “We see the unintended consequence of this aspect of s legislation has caused great financial and emotional distress to people who have unwittingly broken rules they didn’t know existed.”

She acknowledged Waverley council is, going forward, trying to ensure householders are made aware of CIL and its exemption paperwork. Cllr Austin added: “But we need to right this wrong for those who have already had to make these huge payments.”

Leader of the council, Cllr Paul Follows, said work is already being done to investigate the CIL levy issues but welcomed the cross-party collaboration. The CIL levies will be reviewed as part of the council’s Local Plan process, according to Cllr Follows.

“I hope the poor folk who are being pestered by Waverley to pay these charges will be left alone until we have resolved this,” said Cllr Michael Goodridge. He raised concern that he has been told everyone has been looking at the issue for a while, but it could take a lot more time in the Local Plan.

The Liberal Democrat council leader also added the CIL regulations was something his party had inherited from the previous administration. Members also broadly agreed more education of the CIL process was needed, both for councillors and the public.

Emily Dalton

Steve Dally (right) and his wife Caroline. (Credit: Steve Dally)

What is the position in Epsom and Ewell?

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) in Epsom and Ewell Borough

The **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)** is a charge imposed by **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** on certain types of new development. It helps fund local infrastructure, such as schools, healthcare facilities, and transport improvements.

Does CIL Apply to Single Residential Developments or Home Extensions?

When CIL is Payable

CIL **applies** if your project involves:

- **New dwellings** - Any development that creates a new residential unit is **liable for CIL**, regardless of size.
- **Large extensions** - If an extension or new build increases the **gross internal floor area** by **100 square meters or more**, CIL applies.

When CIL is NOT Payable

You may **not** have to pay CIL if:

- Your project **adds less than 100 square meters** of additional internal floor space (unless it creates a new dwelling).
- You qualify for **exemptions or reliefs** (see below).

CIL Exemptions and Reliefs

Some developments may be **exempt** from CIL, including:

- **Self-build homes** - If you're constructing your own home, you can apply for a **self-build exemption**.
- **Residential annexes or extensions** - If the work is for your own use and meets specific criteria, it may be exempt.
- **Affordable housing** - Developments that meet affordable housing requirements are exempt.

Important: You must **apply for exemptions before starting construction**. Failure to do so may result in the **full CIL charge** becoming payable.

How is CIL Calculated?

CIL is based on the **net increase** in **gross internal floor area (GIA)** and is subject to **annual indexation**.

Current Residential CIL Rate (2025): £204.50 per square meter
(Source: Epsom & Ewell Borough Council)

CIL Process & Next Steps

If your project is subject to CIL, follow these steps:

1. **Submit a Planning Application** - Include the required **CIL forms** when submitting your application.
2. **Complete an Assumption of Liability Form** - Before starting work, submit this to the Council.
3. **Submit a Commencement Notice** - Notify the Council **before construction begins**.
4. **Receive and Pay Your CIL Charge** - Once the Council issues a **Demand Notice**, make the payment as required.

More Information & Guidance

For full details, access CIL forms, and check the latest updates, visit:

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council CIL Guidance

Sam Jones

Will Epsom and Ewell be bailing out Guildford?

8 February 2025



A Surrey council faces tough decisions in the future after receiving a “very difficult financial settlement from the government”.

Guildford Borough Council has no extra funding to meet inflation and demand pressures, meaning it will have to cut costs and increase income to make ends meet. Cost pressures looming over the council stand at over £3m, with National Insurance increases and developments causing the most strain.

The local authority said it has been told the settlement it would receive from the government for the financial year 2025/26. However, the “significant change” for the next year is Guildford council will not have a cash increase despite an assumed council tax rise of 2.99%.

Even though residents and businesses may face increased council tax and business rates, without extra government funding, the authority’s overall “Core Spending Power” will remain the same,” the council’s report stated.

No additional funding is coming to meet the cost of pay awards from the central government, inflation and demand pressures. Guildford Council is therefore reliant upon cost reduction and increasing income to meet these costs. Richard Bates, Guildford Council’s Chief Financial Officer, said: “In the light of a poor settlement, we’ve done the best we can.”

The projected budget gap is expected to grow from 0 in 2025 to potentially £5.9m in four years (2028/29) with a at least a £1.6m increase every year, Service costs from the council are projected to rise from £16.4m in 2025/26 to potentially £20.3m in 2028/29.

Council officers said they will be looking to attack the gap with a series of measures, including budget reviews across the board, service reviews, and comparing charges (e.g. Car parking) with neighbouring councils.

Cost pressures facing the council currently stand at around £3.18m, with the biggest demands coming from firstly the rise in National Insurance and then capital spending on developments.

National Insurance (NI) increases were announced in the Chancellor’s autumn statement and the combined cost of these changes adds up to around £1,000 per employee, according to council documents. Not only affecting public bodies, the rise in NI costs could impact contractors and suppliers to the council and push up costs further.

The government is providing some support to public sector employees, but the actual amounts were not announced as part of the provisional settlement. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said it plans to put £69bn into council budgets across England.

Paying for the council’s “ambitious” building programme is a significant part of the financial gap, with large amounts being borrowed for major schemes like the Weyside Urban Village development. However, the cost of borrowing has increased significantly since many of the major schemes in the capital programme were approved, in line with the council’s report.

Although the 10-year-project will require significant borrowing, the council is managing the levels of debt by selling assets. Officers have warned that a borrowing strategy for the next few years will be “critical” to ensure interest costs are minimised and that long term deals are secured at competitive and affordable rates.

However, the Chief Finance Officer said in his report that the “on-going inflation pressure on land values leave a significant projected deficit on [the Weyside Urban Village] scheme”. He added that a “mitigation strategy needs to be agreed in Spring ’25”.

A decision on the council’s medium term budget (2025/2026- 2028/29) will be made at full council on February 5.

Outside Guildford Borough Council (Credit: Google Street View)

Will Epsom and Ewell be bailing out Spelthorne?

8 February 2025



“Significant weaknesses” in a council’s financial records have been laid bare in a new report.

External auditors for Spelthorne Borough Council said they could not fully assess or complete the financial statements as there was inadequate record keeping. Many queries remained unanswered, said auditors, who reported they were unable to conclude on the 2023/2024 closing balances.

“Without complete and accurate information, the Council cannot have full confidence in the financial decisions reached,” the report said. “The finance papers are detailed but, in our judgement, can be confusing to follow, contain contradictory information in the same paper and lack a clear narrative by way of explanation.”

Spelthorne Council has not fully addressed the funding gaps and risks within its financial plan, according to the report. The latest outline budget for 2025/26 reported in December 2024 shows the council closing its £0.3m funding gap in 2025/26 but it has larger gaps of £3.5m and £5.4m predicted for the following consecutive financial years 2026/27 and 2027/28. The report said the council does not have agreed plans to address the budget gaps which amount to around 15-20 per cent of net revenue expenditure.

Although the council has a significant amount of investment properties for which it receives commercial rents, auditors found recording keeping for monitoring the key leases was “inadequate”. The council had around £52m in commercial rents in 2023/24 but auditors could not be assured by the amount recognised and the cash received.

The “uncomfortable” report made for “stark reading” by both councillors and officers. Councillor Karen Howkins told members Spelthorne “is a council in crisis” at an Audit Committee council meeting on January 28.

Auditors raised concerns that the minimum revenue position (MRP) – the amount of money the council must put aside in its budget each year to ensure it can repay debt incurred for capital expenditure- is likely to have been played down significantly. But auditors said they did not have enough evidence to conclude this was the case.

Spelthorne Council is currently facing over £1bn debt from investing in shops and offices, including Elmsleigh Retail Centre in Staines. Paying this sum for the next 50 years, auditors stressed the council were not “effectively managing” the risk.

Auditors also highlighted issues around Spelthorne’s accounts for purchasing three commercial properties including Carter Building, Thames Tower and Porter Building- worth £351m. The report reads that Spelthorne council only paid £297.9m for the properties and the total figure was ‘grossed up’ by £53.7m to include tax and added the debt to its balance sheet.

The first audit the council has received since 2017/18, auditors noted auditing requirements and have changes and standards have increased. The report also highlighted issues with council staff not having capacity or capability to carry out or send through the work required for the audit.

Officers said a training session will be provided for council staff and, in future, staff will be separated between those working on the audit and those working on the council’s overall budget setting.

Several issues and weaknesses were identified during the audit and 16 recommendations have been put forward.

The report flagged “significant weaknesses” in governance arrangements and “extremely poor relationships” between some political groups is impacting the council’s financial management. Auditors recommended the council “urgently” address the issue of trust and apparent “toxic culture” between members and officers.

An LGA Peer review in November 2022 concluded: “There is poor behaviour by some councillors towards each other and staff which is widely recognised as damaging the council’s reputation. It is also affecting staff morale and the organisation’s ability to retain and recruit staff.” As of January 2025 there have been 10 complaints outstanding with the monitoring officer regarding councillor behaviour.

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

Surrey County tax increase vote

8 February 2025



Valuation band	Core precept	ASC precept	Overall precept
A	£1,039.83	£191.07	£1,230.90
B	£1,213.13	£222.92	£1,436.05
C	£1,386.44	£254.76	£1,641.20
D	£1,559.74	£286.61	£1,846.35
E	£1,906.35	£350.30	£2,256.65
F	£2,252.96	£413.99	£2,666.95
G	£2,599.57	£477.68	£3,077.25
H	£3,119.48	£573.22	£3,692.70

A council tax hike could be hitting Surrey as members take the first look at the county's budget. Residents could see a maximum increase of 4.99 per cent on council tax, meaning a rise of £1.69 a week for a Band D household.

The proposed increase, which would come into force from April, was agreed by the cabinet on January 28 and will be voted on at Surrey Council's budget meeting next week on 4 February.

"I absolutely recognise the pressure that any increase in council tax will put on households," said Tim Oliver OBE, Surrey County Council leader, at the cabinet meeting. But the leader added increasing council tax was important to "balance our budget and to ensure we can continue to deliver improved and increased services meeting the demand we know we will experience".

Surrey county council said there is a significant pressure on this year's budget due to the rising demand for services, like adult social care and children's home to school transport, combined with inflation and added national insurance contributions- which has resulted in a higher cost of delivery.

Council documents state that for the local authority to balance the books, it has to hike up council tax by the maximum 2.99 per cent, and increase the Adult Social Care Precept by 2 per cent. The final budget for 2025/26 proposes total funding of £1,264.1m, an increase of £55.7m from 2024/25.

Currently a Band D property pays £1,758.60 a year in council tax, but following the maximum increase in tax, residents could see themselves forking out almost £88 extra. This would bring the total up to £1,846.35 a year. People living in Band H properties could have to cough up £3,692.70 a year for the county council.

This does not take into account other charges in a household's council tax bill, such as parish precepts, or the police and crime commissioner's precept. Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Lisa Townsend, has heavily indicated she wants the precept to increase by roughly 4.3 per cent. A decision on the PCC's budget is also due on Monday February 3.

Council reports state the local authority "continues to see exponential increases in demand for services" particularly adult and children's social care as well as Home to School Travel Assistance. It adds that the demand for these services has resulted in a "need for further efficiencies", or cuts, within the services and increasing council tax to balance the books.

Draft proposals show the Adult social care budget has been increased by £18.7m and the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning budget (which includes home to school transport) has gone up by £19.2m. However, the county council is also making 'efficiency savings' or cuts to the departments, £33m and £12.6m respectively.

The increase in council tax comes after the new government announced a rise in both the National Living Wage and in Employer's National Insurance Contributions. Not only will this increase the county council's own wage bill, it may impact its suppliers and potentially lead to increased costs all round. Compensation funding for local councils was not confirmed in the provisional Local Government Financial Settlement, leaving Surrey with some uncertainty.

Speaking to the cabinet, Cllr Oliver said the council has seen "higher levels of inflation than predicted", an increase in national insurance contributions and national living wage, as well as the cost of borrowing for capital investment has continued to rise as interest rates remain high. The council leader also pointed out the increased demand for services, particularly mental health, and pressures on the health system.

"We have achieved financial stability and we are not in the same position as many other authorities across the country," said Cllr Oliver. "We have not asked the government for extra financial support and we are not proposing to seek a referendum on increasing our council tax above the permitted 4.99 per cent."

Parents lose trust in Surrey state "school family" admission priority

8 February 2025



A Surrey suburb is up in arms as an ‘outstanding’ secondary school could change its admissions, making it more tricky for local children to get a place.

Consultation for the new admissions for September 2025 at Hinchley Wood School, in Esher, ends on Wednesday 22 January. If approved, the academy school would prioritise students who attend the schools within its own trust- Hinchley Wood Primary School and Thames Ditton Junior School- leaving Long Ditton St Mary’s Junior School and Claygate Primary School lower down the pecking order.

But parents of Long Ditton St Mary’s Junior are furious their child could lose a place at the only local state school in the area. Children who attend Long Ditton St Mary’s Junior School have traditionally gone to Hinchley Wood Secondary School, but the admission changes could see local students deprioritised from their closest high school and forced to go elsewhere.

The ‘outstanding’ Ofsted-rated school frequently comes as one of the top places in Surrey. Ben Bartlett, CEO of Hinchley Wood Learning Partnership Trust, said he had “massive sympathy” for those worried about the proposed changes and understood parents always want their child to get into the “best” school.

An academy trust, Hinchley Wood School is legally and financially one organisation so it shares resources such as safeguarding, SEND provision, disadvantaged learners and educational subjects like French, Music and P.E with trust schools. Mr Bartlett argued giving the two primary schools priority keeps children and their parents “in the Hinchley Wood [trust] family”.

Mr Bartlett and Co-Headteacher Ms Maria Cachia explained keeping students in the trust means any safeguarding information or education can be easily transferred as schools have “shared values and strategic aims”.

Now, parents say they are having to decide whether to send their children to the Ofsted-rated ‘good’ Thames Ditton primary school to have a better chance of going to Hinchley Wood, or to send them to the ‘outstanding’ Long Ditton St Mary’s Junior. One dad said it was like “you’ve got a gun to your head from the local state school”.

Shaya’s son goes to Thames Ditton Infant School. He said his family has been “torturing ourselves for eight months” to decide which junior school to send him to in the hopes of getting a good secondary school place which could have a “profound impact” on his longterm future. Shaya said: “We’re being forced to choose whether to prioritise our son’s immediate educational means at the sacrifice of his long-term education.”

Shaya, who lives less than 1km away from the secondary school, said: “The withdrawal of the catchment area clearly demonstrates the Trust wants to prioritise children who do not live locally over local children, and its own financial health.” But the senior leadership at Hinchley Wood argued it would not be fair for children attending a primary school within the Trust to not proceed to the secondary school just because they live out of the catchment area.

Antony Warren, parent of two children at Long Ditton St Mary’s Infant School, said it is “wholly unfair” for the academy to change its admissions suddenly. He said: “We moved, we invested significant life savings into our house and in the community as a whole [so] we knew we were in the catchment area.”

If children do not get accepted into Hinchley Wood Secondary, the next nearest school could be in Kingston where the council has no obligation to accept Surrey pupils. While the Long Ditton students could walk down the road to the secondary school, they may have to get the bus for 30-45 minutes to Esher High or a Kingston school. “I pay my taxes,” said Antony, “I feel my children deserve the right to go to their local state school.”

For many of the young children their first years of education were riddled with Covid and lockdowns, leading to disrupted education and interrupted friendships. Some children now struggle with anxiety and stress, which many parents fear will be exacerbated if the kids start new secondary schools out of the local area where they will not know anyone.

A tight and close-knit community, parents said the Dittons and Hinchley Wood are entangled together with sports teams and extracurricular groups. Preventing children from going to the local secondary school fractures these ties and uproots them from their social connections.

“It’s just not right that a multi-academy trust can just wield its power and prioritise their own schools for their own benefits for their own financial gains [and] totally disregarding the needs of the local community,” said Annette Whymark, who has a son in Year 4. Annette and her husband James Whymark started the action group to spread the word in the Thames Ditton community.

The campaign group, made up of around 65 parents, feared changing the admissions could disperse children into Surrey and Kingston, causing a ripple effect on school admissions. Parents understood those at Hinchley Wood and Thames Ditton primary schools will be in favour of the admissions change because “they want to do what is best for their children”. However, they emphasised it as “grossly unfair”.

Some argued that the Hinchley Wood’s consultation is “financially driven” because it prioritises the primary schools

within their trust by encouraging parents to send their children to that school. By increasing the pupil number, the school will get more funding from the government.

Mr Bartlett disagreed the consultation was motivated by financial gain, and stressed the student admission number for the two primary schools was actually being lowered in line with a falling birth rate.

Based on school admission data from Surrey County Council, Mr Bartlett and Mrs Hogan told the LDRS there would be a “minimal” impact in the number of students from Long Ditton entering the school. The CEO said the area was “blessed with a spread of fantastic schools” from Esher to Kingston, where children can frequently get local buses to school.

“This is a genuine consultation and no decision has been made yet,” said Mr Bartlett. After the consultation finishes, the responses will be read and considered by the governors and trustees for the school.

Monica Harding MP for Esher and Walton, said she was concerned about the impact of the proposed admission changes and has shared these with Ben Bartlett. She said: “I have urged HWS to explore alternatives that better serve local families. I will continue to speak with the leadership at HWS on this issue.

“I have also raised these issues in both meetings and written correspondence with the DfE and Surrey CC. The DfE assured me that they are taking these concerns seriously and will “monitor and work with the trust and Surrey County Council to ensure no schools are made vulnerable by such changes if they occur.”

“I am very aware of the anxiety these proposals are causing parents, and I remain committed to advocating for solutions that keep the best interests of our children at the forefront and ensure all of our local schools are thriving. I encourage all parents to participate in the consultation process to help ensure the final decision reflects the needs of our community.”

“I also recognise that local schools are facing huge financial strain and that they are all challenged to deliver high-quality education without commensurate funding. I will continue to push the Government hard to provide the resources necessary for our children to have the best possible education.”

Campaigners outside Long Ditton Infant school. (Credit: Emma Pericas Sims)

Surrey village to suffer a lot more Heathrow flights

8 February 2025



Residents could suffer “an unacceptable amount of noise” from an airport as flight directions change, meaning the number of landing planes could increase from 36 to over 300 a day in a Surrey village.

Heathrow Airport is proposing to change its flight patterns to share noise more equally to communities around the site. This involves alternating between the southern and northern runways when the airport operates flights eastwards.

Most of the time (70 per cent) the airport runs on westerly operation, meaning planes take off and land towards the west as the wind favours the west direction at Heathrow. From 7am-3pm, planes land on the northern runway and depart on the southern runway. Halfway through the airport’s day, at 3pm, Heathrow switches runways to give neighbouring residents a break.

This is because of the Cranford Agreement in 1952 which restricted departures over Cranford. But the government ripped up the Cranford agreement in 2009 to bring more equal noise distribution in the residential areas around Heathrow.

As planes are now allowed to take off over Cranford (to the north-east of the airport) Heathrow is proposing to make changes to the airfield to allow for easterly operations of planes taking off and landing from the east. These include: building a noise barrier, up to seven foot high, near Longford, as well as changing the taxiways where planes turn on the runway to reduce ground noise.

The applicant states the redistribution of noise around Heathrow Airport will result in lower noise effects in some locations and higher noise effects in others, but it will enable noise from aircraft operations to be more fairly distributed around the airport than it is currently.

Despite the overall aim meant to have a more even spread of noise, Spelthorne council’s noise officer has objected to the changes as it will adversely impact Spelthorne and especially Stanwell Moor.

Currently only 36 planes arrive over Stanwell Moor on an easterly operation but if plans go ahead it could skyrocket to 328 landing a day, according to council documents. Councillor Joanne Sexton (Independent Spelthorne Group/ Ashford East), leader of Spelthorne council, said it was “quite a shock” to see the dramatic increase.

Heathrow submitted a planning proposal to Hillingdon Borough in October 2024, which is now in the consultation stage. Councillors wholeheartedly voted to object to the scheme, citing unacceptable noise impacts on the borough, at an environment and sustainability council meeting on January 14. These comments will be passed on to Spelthorne's planning committee.

Only Cllr Paul Woodward (Conservative/ Ashford Town) approved Heathrow's proposal, arguing: "Landing is the quietest part of the operation until you put the airbrakes halfway down the runway."

Stanwell Moor runs directly parallel to Heathrow's southern runway which leaves residents with a "constant stream of aircraft noise" for half the day, according to council documents. But if the airport uses full easterly alternation, the noise officer said this would "significantly increase the noise and frequency of overflights and significantly affect [Stanwell Moor] residents".

Although Cllr Sexton raised concerns of Ashford becoming increasingly louder with plane noises, the noise officer said the changes would not harmfully impact Ashford or Sunbury.

Applauding the council for objecting to the project, Cllr Sue Doran (Labour/ Stanwell North) said: "It doesn't matter which way [the planes] fly, the noise is terrible all the time." Cllr Doran said she had lived in Stanwell for 15 years and said there is noise "virtually 24 hours a day".

Heathrow Airport is aiming to introduce easterly runway alternation by 2028. Currently there is no proposed increase in the number of flights taking off or landing from the airport, just changes in the direction.

A Heathrow spokesperson said: "We know that noise is an important issue for local communities which is why we have published clear reduction targets in our Noise Action Plan. Our noise footprint has reduced by 41 per cent since 2006 and we expect to see further reductions. Easterly alternation is aimed at delivering predictable noise respite to more communities and is coupled with our ongoing work to install noise insulation for our nearest neighbours."

Heathrow Airport. Credit Heathrow Airports Limited.

Surrey school children road safety faces funding challenges

8 February 2025



Children at a special needs school could be left waiting years for a much needed crossing. Clifton Hill School, on Chaldon Road in Caterham, is a secondary school for 11-19 year olds with severe and complex learning difficulties and special needs.

Students at the school demanded action in May 2024 after telling councillors they felt scared going on the road outside their school because there is no safe crossing. Pupils are encouraged to use the cafe in the church opposite the school as part of their independent living skills, but they said people "driving like maniacs" or even honk at them if the students take too long crossing the road.

Surrey County Council said: "In the interim we are looking into rectifying shorter-term issues such as improving line painting and signage, and we will keep the school and parents updated on this as we progress. We'll continue to do all we can to keep our roads safe."

Short-term measures included lowering a school warning sign so drivers can see it at car-level, getting the greenery cut back so drivers can see the signs, and installing a dropped kerb for wheel-chair users.

"Another term is over and our children can't cross the road safely," said Rachael Forkan, mum and member of the Clifton Hill Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Ms Forkan said she and the head were "not thrilled" the signal crossing was part of a 'long-term plan' for improving the school's road safety. Ms Forkan said: "It isn't a bit helpful because that could be anything from two years to seven, and my son will leave there in five years' time."

Officers reported there were no dropped kerbs between the school and the church which made it "problematic to navigate" for wheelchair users trying to cross smoothly. Where the County Council would deliver road safety awareness training to students, for students with complex and multiple disabilities, like at Clifton Hill, officers said this type of training would "not be appropriate".

"It's definitely a priority for now," said Councillor Jeremy Webster for Caterham Hill. "But the [County Council] is telling me there isn't any money and that we have to wait a couple of years, but by then problems will be worse."

The local councillor described Chaldon Road as “problematic” with existing highways issues such as increasing pressure from developments and an unstable embankment. Cllr Webster told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) he would continue to urge the Surrey County and Caterham Parish council for their financial support.

Conservative MP for East Surrey, Claire Coutinho, who visited the school in summer 2024, said she recently met with Cllr Jeremy Webster at the school for an update on the crossing issue. Ms Coutinho said she asked him to maintain pressure on his colleagues at Surrey County Council to find a “funding solution” to get so a crossing installed as soon as possible.

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said: “At a site meeting completed in October 2024 we recommended a zebra or push button signalised crossing as the most appropriate road safety measure to be introduced. We appreciate that parents would like this to be implemented immediately, however this assessment forms part of a wider piece of work across the county which has seen us identify demands for road safety measures across another circa 50 sites, and we will have to prioritise which of these sites are then worked on with any available funding. At present, the council hasn’t set its budget for this area of work and as such no funding has yet been allocated.

“Which sites take priority will depend upon a number of factors including the level of road safety risk based on site observations and collision history, the number of people that would benefit from improved facilities, cost and the level support from the local community for any proposals. Once funding has been identified it typically takes a year to design, complete the legal consultations and then implement a zebra or signalised pedestrian crossing.”

Surrey’s D’Oyly Carte Island concerts cancelled.

8 February 2025



Plans for a summer concert on a private island as part of Weybridge Festival have been cancelled over health and safety concerns. D’Oyly Carte Island hosted three days of music and entertainment as part of the Weybridge Festival over a weekend in July 2024.

The private island, inaccessible to the public for part of the year, opened its grounds last year for Weybridge Festival and celebrated music ranging from Motown and Soul to 70s’ and 80s’ soft rock. But councillors have decided to issue a counter notice to stop the event going ahead in 2025 over safety concerns.

Surrey Police and Environmental Health representatives slammed the application for its lack of important information to ensure public safety such as the limited access to and from the island, and the lack of adequate protection to prevent members of the public falling into the river. The pair emphasised that no site plans have been shared with officers, nor exit routes or briefing for marshals to judge the safety of the operation.

“We don’t want to wait for a tragedy to happen,” said Lucy Marriot, from Surrey Police at Elmbridge Borough Council licensing meeting on January 7, “We want to take a proactive approach to public safety.” Both representatives argued there was not an acknowledgement of the potential dangers of an island-based music festival and the size of the event.

But Andy Hill, the applicant and owner of the island, asked the committee in a statement: “Was it a mistake that the event was approved last year?”. Although Mr Hill submitted the same risk assessment form as last year, the council said its internal procedures for Temporary Event Notice licensing had changed and new officers have come into post.

Serious safety concerns

The council’s principal environment officer raised the alarm that no measures have been listed to protect the public. She told the committee the applicant’s risk assessment form gave no details on how the event would look after people (who may have had a few drinks) would be protected from uneven paths, the water enveloping the island or the courtyard fountain.

A unique location, only one bridge serves as the connection from the mainland to D’Oyly Carte Island. Almost 500 people could leave the island via the sole bridge at the same time, according to the officer, and no evidence has been given whether the bridge could hold the weight.

“I hope you don’t see it as health and safety gone mad,” the officer said, as both officers repeatedly urged they did not want the event to be cancelled but wanted the public to enjoy it safely. The council’s environmental officer said she had “serious concerns about Mr Hill’s attitude to health and safety”.

Council documents state that nine marshals and one professional security marshal will be employed to look after nearly 500 people at any one time over the weekend. In his defence, Mr Hill said after the meeting that all the marshals employed for the festival had worked on the island before and so knew the land much better than other staff.

But the Licensing Officer said she did not think it was “appropriate for one [professional security] marshal, one trained person, to look after 499 people and cover the whole island.” She stressed that other marshals would not be trained in

crowd control or lifeguarding to look after people at the island event, according to the submitted documents.

A spokesperson from the council said: “Despite the Police and environmental health offering to meet with the applicant to discuss and address these concerns, no meeting was accepted. Consequently, our environmental health team and the Police had no choice but to object which resulted in a hearing where the licensing sub-committee refused the temporary event notice in its current form.”

“Health & Safety on steroids”

Speaking after the meeting, Mr Hill said: “In 2024 D’Oyly Carte Island held a series of Summer Concerts that were enjoyed by over 3,000 of our local community as part of the wider Weybridge Festival. Before the concerts we met with the police, health & safety, noise control, ambulance services and a few others to make sure we held an event safe for the public. These bodies made some good recommendations and, at a cost of over £35,000, we implemented them all with the associated risk assessments.

“The outcome from these recommendations and the associated investment was no injuries, no complaints, no arrests, no drugs and no disorder, just a flood of compliments. We were asked by Weybridge Festival to do the same again for 2025, so I submitted an application to repeat what we held in 2024. It is a complete mystery why the Council has rejected our application, cancelling the D’Oyly Carte Island Summer Concerts in 2025.

“Were Health & Safety negligent in their duties by allowing the concerts to proceed in 2024? Why have they objected to a repeat of the same event in 2025? One can only speculate that Health & Safety has been put on steroids and they are more interested in creating unnecessary meetings and paperwork, repeating work that has already been completed, simply to keep them gainfully employed at tax payers expense.

“We have invested heavily in bringing D’Oyly Carte Island back to life and have created opportunities like the café, bar, creperie and the D’Oyly Carte Island Summer Concerts. These activities include the community on our journey to renovate this amazing piece of history and culture in Weybridge. All I would ask in return is for the 100,000 people that have visited the island to write or email the Council asking them to reverse their decision and permit the D’Oyly Carte Island Concerts to proceed.”

Surrey’s affordable homes left unclaimed

8 February 2025



Millions of pounds worth of affordable Surrey homes remain unbuilt because nobody is willing to take on the project. It has left Spelthorne Borough Council scrambling around trying to find a housing partner with negotiations set to take place over a potential rent to buy scheme.

It leaves families dangling in limbo on waiting lists with nowhere to go as there are almost 2,500 people are currently on Spelthorne’s housing list.

It comes as the developers behind a massive Staines Tower block withdrew all affordable housing from the scheme and instead only offered the council money to put towards low-cost homes elsewhere in the borough.

The Elmsleigh Road scheme was given the green light on appeal in 2022, after Spelthorne Borough Council had refused the application the previous year. The site, at the Old Telephone Exchange, is still under construction by the developer, Fairview New Homes.

Developers, Fairview, asked the council to remove affordable homes from its plans for 206 new units in two towers in Staines, and agreed a £3.85m contribution to go towards off-site affordable housing, instead of the 70 homes that were originally planned.

However, the council opted to delay accepting the money and approached a rent-to-buy provider, Rent Plus, to potentially take the affordable housing off its hands. Cllr Lawrence Nichols (Liberal Democrat/ Halliford and Sunbury West) told a planning committee on January 8: “If we take the [developer’s] money, Rent Plus walk away.”

Rent Plus buys affordable homes from developers at a discount, and then leases them to low-income families on the waiting list with the long-term plan of buying them.

The council had previously rejected using Rent Plus because the company did not provide housing to “the most needy” in line with the council’s legal requirements, the Housing Officer told the committee. Cllr Nichols said Spelthorne council has a meeting with the provider, Rent Plus, scheduled for January 14, next week.

“No interest”

The developer told the committee it had approached numerous registered providers for affordable housing but there was “no interest from any to take the residential units”. There were four separate tender processes and during the most recent, 81 parties were approached. Only 21 responses were received and all declined the opportunity to purchase the homes.

Speaking at the meeting, Director of Affordable Housing for Fairview New Homes Jonathan Millership, said: “The responses highlighted several issues that were specific to this development; these include the high rise nature of the building and the inclusion of a single staircase, a lack of appetite for flats in tall buildings outside London and a general lack of appetite for developer-led section 106 schemes.”

But councillors were not impressed. Cllr Katherine Rutherford (Independent Spelthorne Group/ Ashford Common) said the company “should have done their research”.

Cllr Darren Clarke (Conservative/Laleham and Shepperton Green) said: “Built the wrong thing in the wrong place to the wrong standard, but people don’t want them.” He added: “We all want affordable housing [and] we’ve got a real housing crisis.”

The council had also considered accepting the £3.8m and putting in its s106 pot for building community infrastructure. Officers explained the council could then use this to buy homes in the borough and then rent them out as affordable housing, generating a profit.

Councillors eventually decided to defer the decision on whether to accept the developer’s contribution until the next planning meeting in February 2025.

Image: CGI visualisation from Thames Street or the Elmsleigh Road Scheme. (Credit: Spelthorne Borough Council Planning documents/ Fairview New Homes)

Walton Golf Club’s dismissal of one-in-hole unfair

8 February 2025



A greenkeeper who had worked at a Surrey golf course for almost 40 years has won a case for “unreasonable” dismissal after he was sacked when his digger fell into a hole. An employment tribunal found the disciplinary action taken against the 58-year-old had “snowballed” before alternative options were considered.

Michael Hayne’s digger had to be hauled from a ditch at Walton Heath Golf Club, in Tadworth, after the machine had tumbled into a hole, cab-side down while the driver was not wearing a seatbelt. The deputy course manager initially dismissed the accident as minor because no harm was done, and so did not formally report it in an accident log book.

But his bosses at the golf club viewed it as a significant incident and Mr Haynes was later dismissed for gross misconduct. The managers argued it was a “serious breach” of health and safety rules that the accident was not reported, and could cause more incidents.

Mr Haynes argued that he was sure he told Mr Mann about the accident at the time and considered he did not need to write up the event in the health and safety book.

The report, published December 23, 2024, detailed that the golf course had two diggers weighing 7.5 tons and 2.5 tons. Mr Haynes had been externally trained on how to use the diggers since around 2005, and his certification was updated every five years- although his current renewal had been overdue.

During a staff training session in November 2021, the instructor reportedly told course manager at the time, Michael Mann, that Mr Haynes was “very lucky with his accident that he hadn’t been seriously hurt or worse”. But Mr Mann said he did not know about the digger incident.

After some initial investigation, the Surrey club launched a disciplinary hearing against Mr Haynes, accusing him of “gross misconduct” for failing to comply with health and safety standards.

In a letter before the disciplinary hearing in November 2021, Mr Haynes wrote: “I have been a faithful employee of this Club for nearly 40 years. I love this Club and have spent my life in its service. I have a clean disciplinary record.

“If I were to be dismissed, not only would I lose my livelihood but also my wife and I would lose our home. I can assure this meeting that I have learned a lesson and will never fail to report any incident again. I would welcome any additional

training that is felt necessary.”

Mr Haynes was dismissed without notice, and escorted off the site. The Chief Executive, Mr Woodward, had decided his explanation was “unacceptable” and the “trust and confidence placed” in him had been “completely undermined”. He added further dangerous incidents could have been avoided if Mr Haynes had reported the initial accident.

In desperation, Mr Haynes appealed the dismissal twice and provided photographic and video evidence of incidents not reported by other members of staff. However, this appeal was rejected both times.

However, the employment tribunal has now found Mr Haynes’ dismissal was “procedurally unfair”. It said there was no real evidence that any of the decision-makers weighed up the possibility of an alternative sanction for the Claimant.

The report stated there were “flaws” with the golf club’s investigation process such as “exaggerating and maximising the seriousness of the incident”. For instance, inconsistencies in describing the final position of the digger as “tipping over” and “almost horizontal”.

The tribunal still found Mr Haynes “culpable” for failing to report the digger incident in the accident book as he was involved. Employment Judge Leith said: “His failure to [report it] was rendered considerably starker because of his [senior] role [...] he should have known better.”

Concluding the case, the tribunal ruled that Mr Haynes’ compensation will be reduced by 50 per cent because of his failure to log the accident. The report did not disclose the amount.

Walton Heath Golf Club has been contacted for comment.

Special case for VAT exemption for special education needs?

8 February 2025



Private schools are “not a lifestyle choice but a necessity” for children with special educational needs (SEN), argues the headteacher of an independent school in Reigate.

Tuition fees are expected to soar from Wednesday January 1, 2025 as the government is scrapping the tax exemption on private schools across the country. The tax is expected to bring £1.7 billion a year, according to the Treasury.

But Mrs Michelle Catterson, head of Moon Hall School, a Specialist Dyslexia school, said: “If you can afford to pay, you should. But there should be exemptions for SEN kids.”

Around 200 children between the ages of seven and 16 attend Moon Hall School- all of whom have been diagnosed primarily with dyslexia, a learning condition that can cause difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. Moon Hall provides a student-to-staff ratio of about 12:1 so pupils get extra support and adapt to meet their learning needs.

Mrs Catterson explained her students with SEN, 70 per cent of whom have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), often cannot have their needs met locally in state schools, so there is “no viable alternative” for education. The Local Authority, like Surrey County Council, will pay for specialist provision in these instances.

“We offer local authorities good value for money,” Mrs Catterson claimed, with most of the school’s GCSE results boasting higher than average.

The head teacher said she believed “100 per cent of the kids [at the school] have SEN” but because of long and complicated process of applying for an EHCP, many parents often “give up” on the process. Instead, around 30 per cent of students pay for the specialist education.

Fees used to start at £7,505 per term for a child in year 7, according to the school’s prospectus. But now, parents could be set back £10,424. The Department for Education has said it does not expect school fees to increase by 20 per cent as schools do not pass VAT onto parents. But as tuition fees is Moon Hall’s only source of income, Mrs Catterson argued that they have no choice. “Small, specialist settings like [Moon Hall] simply cannot absorb the additional costs imposed by VAT,” she said.

Most Children with EHCPs have their needs met within the state sectors, according to government officials. If an EHCP assessment concludes a child can only be supported in a private school, the local authority funds that child’s place and can reclaim the VAT they pay.

Despite the expensive tuition fees, the headteacher claimed Moon Hall is “not an affluent school” and the government will find “no swimming pools” on the grounds. As a charity, any extra income is put back into the school by spending on staff to help the students, according to Mrs Catterson.

Impact on the parents

“It’s really short-sighted,” said Mrs Catterson. The head claimed adding VAT to SEN private school fees will mean more parents will apply for an EHCP, causing further backlog and creating extra costs to the government, which will need to provide for those needs.

Alternatively, some parents take on two jobs to fund their children through private school. Mrs Catterson stressed it would be an “awful situation” if a “settled, happy child, making good progress” was moved to the state sector where their needs cannot be supported.

Chris Coghlan MP for Dorking and Horley, said: “Moon Hall provides an outstanding education for children with special educational needs in Surrey. Adding VAT to school fees will place an unbearable strain on families who already make significant sacrifices to afford them. The Government must exempt specialist schools like Moon Hall from VAT to ensure children with special needs can continue to access the support and education they deserve.”

“Punish independent schools”

Built in 1863, Moon Hall is a grade II-listed building which was purchased by the founders of the dyslexic school and repurposed as an educational building some forty years ago. Although a grand historical building, repairs and maintenance costs to the site are almost constant- Mrs Catterson said the roof needs replacing which is expected to cost £1.6m, even before pricey specialist chimney repairs.

Not only is the school facing the VAT axe, Moon Hall will have to wrestle with changes in national insurance and minimum wage increases like many other charities. The head told SurreyLive she “still doesn’t know what the true figure will do” to the school and where it can find the extra money. Mrs Catterson said: “It feels like the Labour government is trying to punish independent schools.”

Rebuilding “confidence and trust”

A government spokesperson said: “Ending tax breaks on private schools will help raise additional funds to break down barriers to opportunity and support the 94 per cent of pupils who attend state schools to achieve and thrive including those with SEND.

“Pupils with the most acute needs will not be impacted by this policy. Work has already begun to rebuild families’ confidence in and reform the broken SEND system we inherited. The Budget invested £1b extra in day-to-day provision and earlier this month £740m was directed to support local authorities in creating more specialist places in mainstream schools.”

They added: “We are committed to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, and ensuring special schools cater to those with the most complex needs, restoring parents’ trust that their child will get the support they need.”

Related reports:

[Surrey Tory MPs against school fees VAT](#)

[Taxing question for Surrey’s private schools](#)

Image: Outside Moon Hall School, Reigate. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)