



Surrey County tax increase vote

29 January 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

29 January 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

29 January 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

29 January 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.

29 January 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

29 January 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

29 January 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?

29 January 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)

Surrey prison failed IPP prisoner

29 January 2025



Staff at a Surrey prison failed to get medical attention for a prisoner who was reportedly found “naked on all fours, and barking like a dog” before he took his own life. Haydar Jefferies, 51, died in hospital on March 5 2023, after trying to kill himself in his cell at HMP Coldingley, Woking, a few days earlier.

An inquest jury found scores of failures contributed to Mr Jefferies’ death, amounting to neglect. Mr Jefferies’ mental health drastically deteriorated while he was waiting for parole and this was left untreated by staff responsible for his care,

according to his family's lawyers. The 51-year-old pub manager attempted suicide the day before his long-awaited parole hearing.

After being found guilty of an assault offence in 2006, Mr Jefferies served seven years of an Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence, given to people considered 'dangerous' but the offence did not merit a life sentence.

Nearly ten years after his crime, Mr Jefferies was then recalled and sent back to prison in January 2022 on his IPP sentence. The allegation against Mr Jefferies was reportedly not backed up and the police decided no further action would be taken, within three months after being sent back to prison.

But due to the nature of the IPP sentence and the delays in the Parole Board decision-making, Mr Jefferies was forced to stay at the prison despite all charges being dropped nine months prior.

A Ministry of Justice spokesperson said: "Our thoughts remain with Haydar Jeffries' friends and family. As with all deaths in custody, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman are investigating and we will respond to their report in due course."

By the end of February 2023, Mr Jefferies was acutely psychotic, found by officers in his cell flushing his head down the toilet, naked on all fours, and barking like a dog.

Despite custodial staff noting major concerns over his mental health, they allegedly failed to seek any medical attention or even notify health care providers, according to the family's lawyers Hodge Jones & Allen. Custodial staff allegedly failed to place him on constant supervision and/or take him to an external place of safety.

The jury duly found that Mr Jefferies' IPP status and the delays in his parole hearing materially contributed to the development of his subsequent psychosis, Hodge Jones & Allen solicitors said.

Between his initial release and recall, Mr Jefferies had tried to rebuild his life, setting up his own pub and B&B with his husband, who sadly passed away in 2021.

Zhora Jefferies, Haydar's mother, said: "After creating a wonderful life in the community, it is devastating to have witnessed how Haydar's life was completely destroyed by the nature of his IPP sentence and the extensive delays he experienced when waiting to be released from prison.

"We had to watch our beloved son, brother and father succumb to the fear and paranoia that he was suffering with in the final weeks of his life. We, and Haydar himself, were all crying out for help and it was falling on deaf ears.

"Nothing can be done to bring Haydar back but our biggest hope is that lessons can be learned from his experience. Haydar brought so much love to our family and we will always be grateful for the time we had with him."

A few months into Mr Jefferies' recall to HMP Bullingdon, in early 2022, it was confirmed the allegations against him were no longer being pursued. But he remained in prison for another year, waiting for authorised release by the Parole Board. An application to determine his release on papers was declined, and various delays led to his parole hearing being rescheduled to March 2023.

Mr Jefferies was then transferred to HMP Coldingley on 28 December 2022. By 12 February 2023, he asked to be segregated for his own safety. The jury reportedly heard evidence from a consultant psychiatrist that after being segregated, Mr Jefferies' mental health steeply deteriorated.

By around 18 February 2023, he was suffering from a severe psychotic illness which required timely psychiatric assessment, treatment and transfer to a prison with a healthcare wing.

The jury heard that, during his subsequent 10 days in segregation, Haydar made multiple concerning comments to both prison officers and his family symptomatic of his deteriorating ill-health. This included his intensifying delusional beliefs that prison officers were colluding with prisoners to sexually abuse and kill him, and that they were pumping gas into his cell.

Mr Jefferies' family made numerous phone calls to the prison with serious concerns over his welfare. But none of the calls were appropriately documented in prison records or passed onto the Mental Health Team.

The jury concluded there was a "systematic failure on behalf of the Ministry of Justice" that there was no policy for recording and sharing information from concerned family members, according to Hodge Jones & Partners.

Cormac McDonough, a civil liberties solicitor at Hodge Jones & Allen, who represented the family at the inquest said: "It is extremely rare for a jury to reach a finding of neglect in this context, which demonstrates how fundamentally failed Haydar was while under the care of prison staff at HMP Coldingley.

"It was evident that Haydar was suffering due to the unjust circumstances of his IPP recall and that this contributed to his deteriorating mental state. Staff at the prison failed entirely to recognise his deterioration and to take appropriate steps to keep him safe. His family made repeated attempts to get Haydar the help he patently needed, after receiving multiple distressing phone calls, but no action was taken."

Woking child murder lessons for Surrey's agencies

29 January 2025



Authorities must face serious questions about years of missed chances to prevent Sara Sharif's death.

Sara was murdered aged 10 years old by her father Urfan Sharif and stepmother Beinash Batool. Her uncle Faisal Malik was convicted of causing or allowing her death.

Local authorities are legally responsible for looking after and safeguarding all children, they also have a statutory duty to investigate concerns about welfare. A local child safeguarding practice review will be carried out to examine the missed opportunities and if more could have been done to prevent Sara's death.

Rachael Wardell, Executive Director for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning at Surrey County Council, said: "We are resolute in our commitment to protecting children, and we are determined to play a full and active part in the forthcoming review alongside partner agencies, to thoroughly understand the wider circumstances surrounding Sara's tragic death."

The safeguarding review will bring together the police, social carers, education and health services amongst others to consider the practice of all the agencies involved with the family to identify any learning. The safeguarding review, led by an independent author, will also look at all professionals who had contact with the family.

Unlike a trial or coroner hearing, the review will not hold individuals or organisations to account but looks at how general system change can prevent or reduce the risk of similar instances.

"The focus of the trial has been on the evidence needed to secure the convictions of those responsible for Sara's death," Ms Wardell said. "This means that until the independent safeguarding review concludes, a complete picture cannot be understood or commented upon."

Her father had multiple and repeated contact with Surrey Police and social services before he was charged with murdering the 10-year-old girl last summer. Just a few months before, Sara's school referred her to social services but the case was closed within days.

After the guilty verdicts, and opening the safeguarding review, the case will provoke difficult questions whether Sara's tragic death could have been prevented.

Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza said the case highlighted a "profound weaknesses in our child protection system". She called for a raft of changes including "proper oversight" for children, like Sara, being home schooled.

Dame Rachel said: "There can be no doubt that Sara was failed in the starkest terms by the safety net of services around her. Even before she was born, she was known to social care - and yet she fell off their radar so entirely that by the time she died, she was invisible to them all.

"We can have no more reviews, no more strategies, no more debate. When we say 'never again', we have to mean it - let that be Sara's legacy."

As Sara started school, her abuse went largely undetected or unactioned. The court heard Sara turned up at school with bruises on her face in June 2022 and again in March 2023, despite attempts to cover them in a hijab.

Although Sara never confided in teacher what was going on, a referral was made to Surrey County Council's social services after the second incident- only to be shut down within days, the court heard.

By April 2023, Sara was taken out of school and the violence against the 10-year-old girl escalated in the final weeks of her life. Sharif admitted to the court he repeatedly beat her with a cricket bat, metal pole and mobile phone, throttling her and even hit her in the stomach while she lay dying.

Responding to the verdict, Ms Wardell from Surrey County Council said: "Sara's death is incredibly distressing and we share in the profound horror at the terrible details that have emerged during the trial. We cannot begin to comprehend the suffering that poor Sara endured at the hands of members of her family who should have loved, protected, and cared for her."

"What is clear from the evidence we've heard in court is that the perpetrators went to extreme lengths to conceal the truth from everyone."

A dog's dinner of a licensing scheme?

29 January 2025



Professional dog walkers have rallied against a new dog licensing scheme in Surrey, claiming the managers have overstepped their mark.

Dog walkers may have to pay £360 a year to roam over the Surrey Hills from April 1, 2025. Banstead Common Conservators (BCC), which manage the four sites, said its main reason for setting up the scheme was for safety. The sites include Banstead Heath, Banstead Downs, Park Downs and Burgh Heath.

But those who rely on the open spaces are less convinced. Dog walkers have accused the BCC of “intimidating” and “abusive” behaviour on the heath. Members of the group have claimed the BCC management team have taken pictures of dog walkers without asking them, and told them to put dogs on the lead when the staff do not have authority to.

Emma, who has been a professional dog walker for seven years, said she now feels “anxiety stricken” going to the heath. She said: “Everytime we get out of the van there is fear that they will be waiting for you in the woods, following you.”

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) understands that a handful of dog walkers were “walked off” the Heath last year by the management team for having more than four dogs. Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) introduced a scheme to limit dog walkers to only four in August 2024. The walkers say the BCC team acted outside their remit as this was during the grace period, before the rule came into effect, and not done by council enforcement officers.

Now, the dog walkers say the atmosphere on Banstead Heath is “horrible” and “really uncomfortable”. One person said they feel that even though they are insured, professional and sticking to the rules, they are waiting for someone to make a remark.

A spokesperson for BCC said: “All of our engagement with any user of Banstead Commons is done with respect and in accordance with our statutory duties.” The Conservators claim that regulating any commercial activity, like dog walking, is part of its legal duty under the Metropolitan Commons (Banstead) Supplemental Act of 1893.

They added that BCC has received no complaints relating to the behaviour of our staff from professional dog walkers and noted BCC staff will be issued with body worn cameras for their safety in future.

However, a council spokesperson said they have received some complaints about the management of Banstead Commons Conservators in the last 12 months, which are being reviewed.”

Issues relating to controlling dogs have been on the agenda since 2022, with the BCC noting the significant increase in dog owners and commercial walkers. Given the frequency of people walking dogs (commercially or for leisure) over the years, issues of dogs scaring horses, attacking wildlife or littering poo bags have often appeared in the BCC agenda. The Conservators have often noted when a dog has attacked a horse or bitten a person, or tragically killed a woman.

Commercial dog walkers say they have been “kept in the dark” around the licensing scheme which impacts their livelihoods. They say the meeting minutes do not go into detail about what is being discussed, or, on one occasion, is moved to part 2. Although many of the paid dog walkers say they welcome a licensing scheme, they want it run by the council which owns the land.

According to the minutes of a meeting in November, the BCC can regulate for the “prevention of nuisances” on the Common which would include the ability to licence and ban certain activities.

Emma said: “Local dog walkers are simply not prepared to engage in this scheme based on the clandestine approach of how it manifested and the clear lack of respect and utter disdain they have for the profession.”

The BCC has now published the agreement for the scheme which conditions license holders to “not to cause an annoyance or nuisance or interfere” with other people using the commons. The BCC states they are able to take licences away “with immediate effect” with a written notice if the person breaches the agreement, or does not remedy it in 21 days.

Professional dog walkers must walk with identification, issued by the BCC, on them at all times, according to the rules. Commercial walkers must allow any BCC staff member to read a dog’s chip to establish a dog owner’s details.

Emma said the fee is “extortionate” for just four sites, and not the whole of the borough. One of the dog walkers said they did not like the “piecemeal” approach.

Similar schemes are also being trialled in Surrey. Nonsuch Park, in Epsom, is running a pilot commercial dog licensing fee at £200 a year with a limit of six dogs walking at any one time. The licence will be managed by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council as well as the London Borough of Sutton Council.

A joint-statement by the Conservators read: “With the increasing volume of professional dog walkers, including displacement from other areas that have already implemented restrictions, it has become necessary to take the responsible step of licensing this activity.

“This scheme will help regulate the numbers of dogs being walked commercially on our sites and ensure that companies

are operating safely and treating Banstead Commons, its users and wildlife with respect and consideration.

The BCC said “safety” was one of the “main drivers” for the dog licensing scheme. The group said the scheme will give professional dog walkers “visibility and confidence to operate safely” when using the sites, as well as reassuring other visitors.

The council announced last week that it is reviewing the dog walking limit after a petition calling out the “heavy-handed” nature of the approach. An RBBC spokesperson said: “Only the Council’s enforcement team can enforce our PSPOs. Our enforcement does not extend to the BCC’s own licensing scheme. We will be requesting further information from BCC regarding the operation of their licensing scheme.”

Four dogs in Banstead wood, ahead of the licensing scheme to be introduced. (Credit: Dog walker Emma)

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Case for dog-walker regulation after death-mauling

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Licensed to walk

Ideas for empty Council premises in Reigate and Redhill

29 January 2025



Calls to make use of empty town centre units could see charities and pop-up shops take over in Surrey towns as councillors ask for short-term leases to be made available on council owned buildings. Over £600k is spent every year on maintaining empty shops and offices in Reigate and Banstead borough, according to council data.

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) own several wholly or partially empty commercial properties which they have to pay expensive business rates, utility bills and insurance for. Half of business rates are absorbed by the council, with the other half sent to the central government.

Councillors found that £619k has been spent on the upkeep of vacant commercial units in the borough this year. Three quarters of this is spent on properties in Redhill, including the new Rise shopping centre and Wheatley Court on Cromwell Road.

Around £174k is spent every year on four completely empty properties, including Beech House in Reigate which has been vacant since 2021. The three-storey office block is now up for sale.

While some prime retail commercial units are sitting empty in Redhill town centre, Cllr Neha Boghani (Green Party) has proposed a “common sense” motion to put the spaces to work. She has suggested using short-term ‘Meanwhile leases’ to save the council from paying extortionate business rates by making the space available to volunteer groups until full rental for these buildings is agreed.

‘Meanwhile’ leases essentially allow for the temporary occupation of a retail unit in a town centre without the lengthy administrative and legal process. It means non-commercial occupiers, who would otherwise not be able to afford the rent, can take advantage of the site as soon as possible.

She said: “Let’s open some of our empty spaces for Christmas on Meanwhile Leases. We could create space for community uses, for entertainment, to serve the most vulnerable and provide a decent size temporary venue until the Harlequin reopens. What’s not to like?”

The Green Party has suggested the multiple empty spaces in The Light shopping centre, Redhill, could be used for Christmas charity appeals or community groups. They also referenced the Harlequin Theatre needing a new temporary venue, which the council could provide in one of the empty shops in the centre.

Although charities and voluntary organisations pay peppercorn rent on a prime location store, it is only for a short period of time while the landlord finds a permanent tenant. Charities are often faced with unpredictable funding streams which can make it difficult for them to operate, so having a short-term let could potentially add further uncertainty.

“This arrangement can create something out of nothing,” the Green Party councillor said. “It could be put to good use to support the charities using the space for the short term.”

The Reigate and Banstead Council executive will consider using temporary leases and its potential economic benefits at a future date.

Cllr Neha Boghani outside an empty retail unit in Redhill. (Credit: Green Party)

Surrey pharmacies need a better financial prescription

29 January 2025



Pharmacy owners in Surrey say “enough is enough” as they complain working 12-hour days and barely breaking even. One pharmacist said it has to dispense just over 6,000 prescriptions a month to just about balance the books.

Over the last decade or so, the funding community pharmacies received from the government and NHS have been cut by 40 per cent, with 1,500 closing in the last 10 years.

The government announced a £26 billion boost for the NHS and social care in the budget. A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: “We are committed to working with the pharmacy sector and we will set out further details on allocation of funding for next year in due course.”

Asma’a Al-hindawi has worked at her family-owned pharmacy in Horley, after graduating from university in 2010. What used to be a family passion, is now a tough grind. She said: “It’s a lot of hard work. Sometimes me and my sister have to work 12-13 hours a day, six days a week, and still we’re only breaking even.”

Pharmacies are paid on a piecemeal basis for dispensing prescriptions issued by GPs. This makes up most of the community pharmacies’ income. In 2012, the piecework fee was £2.75 per item; but now, despite inflation, the fee stands at £2.18 per prescription dispensed.

Despite her family business making a loss, Asma’a said: “I feel I have a moral obligation to work this hard to keep the pharmacy running and to help the community with their healthcare.” She explained the pharmacy is a “community service” which she has stuck by despite often getting verbal abuse.

She said the NHS “doesn’t catch up with the prices of the market” when the market cost of medicine increases. Sometimes items are out of stock so the pharmacy has to buy more expensive branded products, but the pharmacy still only receives the £2.18 fee.

“It’s an ethical dilemma,” said Asma’a, “because you can’t tell a patient you cannot sell the medicine otherwise you will make a loss.” Speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service in a bustling pharmacy, with shelves high of medicine, Asma’a said: “If the pharmacy is this busy, it should be making a profit.”

Dorking & Horley MP Chris Coghlan (Liberal Democrat) said: “We really need to make sure our pharmacies are paid properly for the work they’re doing so they can survive and keep helping the community.”

John Bell, who runs South Street Pharmacy in Dorking, started his own mini campaign in protest against the funding situation. He turned off the lights of the pharmacy and posted a note on the window stating: “Why are the lights out in pharmacies? Find out more inside.”

He started the campaign to raise awareness that 500 community pharmacies have closed across the country over the last year. “There comes a point when enough is enough,” said John, explaining pharmacies can’t afford to keep pouring money into a business just to keep it afloat.

The Dorking pharmacist said he makes “zero money” from the main pharmacy business and has to subsidise it with selling the extra hair accessories, sun cream and glasses on the shop floor. Already running at a “skeleton staff”, John said he is dreading the increase in employers’ National Insurance contributions. He said staffing costs have gone up by 50 per cent in 10 years.

Mr Coghlan has written to Wes Streeting, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to “stop the decimation of independent pharmacies”. He wrote: “It’s unacceptable that pharmacies are subsidising NHS work out of their own pockets while being expected to take on more responsibilities.”

In his letter, the Lib Dem MP has urged Mr Streeting to review and increase NHS reimbursement rates to reflect the “true cost” of dispensing and running a pharmacy. Mr Coghlan also asked for employers’ national insurance rise to be “halted” to prevent a “further financial blow” on pharmacies and health providers.

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: “Community pharmacy has been neglected for years, but it has a vital role to play in the shift of care from hospital to the community as we reform the health service through our 10 Year Health Plan.

“We commend the hard-working pharmacists working to support their communities across England and there is never a justification for threatening behaviour.”

Image: MP Chris Coghlan (left) visiting Asma’a (right) at her family-run pharmacy in Horley. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

Local Plan lessons from our neighbour?

29 January 2025



“Four more years?” is the resounding cry after a Surrey council has been moved back to square one with its plan for 8,000 new homes, potentially at a cost of £1m.

Local plans are a crucial framework for councils as they set out where and what type of development is allowed in the borough. Without one, developers effectively have a free-for-all to build where they wish and the council could struggle to defend it.

A planning inspector told Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) in September to reconsider its local plan, especially to increase the number of affordable housing. Despite asking for a 12-15 month extension to straighten out its plan, after six years working on the proposals, the council was given a firm ‘no’ by the inspector.

Christa Masters, the independent planning inspector, judged that Elmbridge could not prove it had five years’ worth of housing for residents. The inspector has also labelled the borough – which includes Cobham, St George’s Hill and Weybridge – as one of the “least affordable in the country”.

The two choices in front of the council are to withdraw the plan and start again, or accept the inspector’s findings of the report being ‘unsound’ and leave the borough open to speculative development. A report will be presented to the council in February 2025 for the council to decide.

“It is clear to us that building new homes is not this government’s priority,” a statement read from three senior councillors. They said: “Instead, it seems intent on forcing Elmbridge Borough Council and our residents to restart the lengthy 3-4 year process of developing a new Local Plan, with the significant additional costs (potentially £1million) this will bring to the council.”

Council leader Mike Rollings, deputy leader Simon Waugh, and leader of Hinchley Wood Residents’ Association Janet Turner, who wrote the statement, said they have been left with no choice by the government than to start again.

A Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government spokesperson said the decision was up to an independent inspector who found the council’s plan ‘unsound’. They said: “We are in a housing crisis and all areas of the country need to play their part in building more and delivering the homes that communities need. We want to see every council have a local plan as soon as possible, but it is for an independent Inspector to examine a local plan to ensure it is sound and legally compliant.”

But not everyone has been so forgiving of the update on the Local Plan. Cllr John Cope, leader of the Conservative opposition on the council, said: “It’s now clear years of work and millions of pounds of local people’s money have gone down the drain – and an acute shortage of affordable housing allowed in Elmbridge.”

He added that the borough will “have to accept the Labour government’s 121% increase in top-down development targets meaning a huge loss of green belt and loss of local democratic control of planning – but with no new roads, GPs, or schools to support the development.”

Dr Ben Spencer MP (Runnymede and Weybridge) and Cllr Cope have also written a joint letter to Planning Minister Matthew Pennycook MP, urging him to review the situation. The pair ask him to grant the council an extension “so this can be resolved with minimal further financial drain on the council’s resources”.

In the letter, Dr Spencer and Cllr Cope also requested for Elmbridge residents to “not pay the consequences” of the failed Local Plan through “higher council tax and reduced local services”.

“As a Council, we have done everything right,” said Cllr Rollings, speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS). He said the council has worked to prepare a Local Plan “that meets its responsibilities” but the government has “have constantly changed and shifted the goalposts”. He explained that mandatory housing targets have kept replacing each other and national planning policy is constantly being tweaked.

Cllr Rollings said: “As a Council leadership we will continue to work for the best outcomes for our residents. And we will do everything we can to protect the green spaces we all love.”

Surrey Taxpayers Face Policing Squeeze Amid Funding ‘Postcode Lottery’

29 January 2025



The “post-code lottery” of police funding could force residents to shoulder more of the burden, according to Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) **Lisa Townsend**. The PCC said she fears it will be inevitable taxpayers will have to contribute more to policing.

Home Secretary **Yvette Cooper** announced she will end the “postcode lottery in policing”, in a speech to local PCCs and police chiefs on November 19. She confirmed that central government funding for police will go up next year by around £500m, with a detailed breakdown of funding allocations for each force will be published mid-December. Until then, many police forces are left in uncertainty about what the changes might be.

But Surrey’s Commissioner said she fears money will be distributed unfairly in Surrey, from the government’s “not fit for purpose” police funding formula. Ms Townsend said if there is a postcode lottery of policing it is financial. She said: “There’s an idea that Surrey is wealthy, but Surrey Police isn’t.”

The way money is divided up for police forces means that some areas receive a significantly larger share than others. For instance, money allocated to Surrey covers just 45% of the total budget whereas other areas such as Northumbria get 80%.

Surrey Police have to save, or cut, £23.4m over the next four years to maintain its current service, according to the LDRS. Inflation, government-agreed pay increases have also contributed to the force’s position.

The Conservative PCC wrote to the Home Secretary on November 13, urging her to review the police funding. She asked the Home Secretary to not use the police funding formula when granting additional money to combat the increase in employers’ National Insurance (NI) as this would “penalise” some counties and benefit others.

Earlier this year, the government provided an additional grant to cover the police pay increase of over 2.5 per cent. Because this money was distributed by the funding formula, Surrey Police had to make up for a shortfall of around £1m, according to the PCC.

In the letter, Commissioner Townsend said she is “prepared to ask local taxpayers to shoulder more of the burden of the cost of policing”. But she added it “cannot be fair” that residents have to pay for an “imposed” increase.

The letter read: “Here in Surrey, 80% of our costs relate to people and so we have calculated that the proposed increase in NI would add approximately £4.5m to our costs. To put this into context, this would be equivalent to an additional £9 on Band D Council Tax or around 100 Police officers.”

Ms Townsend said she did not want to alter Surrey Police’s service to make residents suffer. “What we’re not clear on is what else the government wants us to cut,” she said.

The PCC said she is “not optimistic” about Surrey achieving more money from the new government, despite the county getting an additional £17.3m last year. “We’ve got nobody making the case for us,” Ms Townsend told the LDRS, “we’ve got no Labour MPs or Labour councils.”

A Home Office spokesperson said: “The Government will fully compensate police forces for the impact of the changes to National Insurance Employer contributions.” They added: “Details on the allocation of this funding will be confirmed at the provisional police settlement in mid-December.”

Photo: Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey Lisa Townsend. Credit: Surrey Live photographer Darren Pepe.

Surrey’s focus on independent lives is “good”.

29 January 2025



Surrey County Council's adult social care services have been rated as 'good' by a health watchdog – despite some inconsistencies. In the local authority's first ever overall rating, the Care Quality Commission found SCC 'good' at keeping people independent for longer in communities.

The new report, published November 20, comes from the CQC's new responsibilities to assess how local authorities meet their duties under the Care Act. The watchdog assessed SCC in nine areas, including how the local authority works with people, safeguarding and leadership.

The CQC's report found one of the county council's strengths was that a "variety of measures were in place to prevent, reduce and delay people's needs". People could access information and advice where needed but improvements could be made to streamline this further.

CQC assessment teams reported 70 per cent of the service's provision should be rated "good". The report did highlight some areas that needed improvement, which the council said it would be working on.

Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, said: "The dedication of our staff shines through the report and I'd like to thank them publicly for their hard work making a positive difference to the lives of thousands of people in communities across Surrey.

"Our ultimate goal is to deliver the best possible services for Surrey residents and this 'good' outcome will help instil confidence in the services and support we are providing and that we are on the right path to making further improvements."

Partners with SCC gave positive feedback about how the authority worked with them to support people's independence, according to the report. Data for Surrey showed 86% of people who have received short term support didn't need ongoing longer-term support which is positive compared to the England and regional average of 78%.

Inspectors praised Surrey for their "ambitious" plans to increase supported living by at least 500 spaces to help encourage people's independence, choice and control. The council is also working to keep people in their homes for longer and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions, reducing pressure on A&E departments.

Good, but inconsistent

However, the CQC found there was room for improvement. Although a lot of the feedback seemed positive in the report, inspectors noted experiences of receiving care and support in Surrey varied.

The report said: "One person was assessed and felt listened to, achieving the outcome they wanted, which was to return to live at home. Other people had similar good experiences with staff focusing on what people wanted plus their future wishes, people described staff as being empathic and showing them respect."

Safeguarding was judged to be effective, slightly above the national average, but has some shortcomings. Staff and partners raised concerns about some new safeguarding processes that were not yet fully embedded with knowledge and understanding of some staff.

Staffing challenges were also flagged as an issue, leading to some reviews not carried out in a timely way and leading to a backlog. Partners working with SCC told inspectors the cost of living crisis had affected people on low incomes, and Surrey was an expensive place to live, making it hard to recruit and retain staff and then impact on care services, the report said.

But the report noted SCC has long-term plans to address recruitment challenges which had been created with staff. The local authority stated they were making improvements to manage risks until staffing levels had improved, by making better use of existing resources.

James Bullion, CQC's chief inspector of adult social care and integrated care, said the county council "should be proud of this assessment and the foundation they've created on which to build improvements and further innovation".

He added: "The local authority was very aware that although Surrey is an affluent county, there are pockets of deprivation where residents have high levels of need and disadvantage. The authority knew of these very differing needs of its population and were doing some creative work to meet those needs and help people keep their independence."

Commenting on the report's feedback for improvement, Mrs Mooney said: "As we celebrate this achievement, we also recognise that there are areas where we need to learn and develop and we are actively working to address all feedback from the CQC through comprehensive improvement plans. Our new director of adult social services recently started with us, so we're well-placed to build on this result to further raise the bar for our residents."

Photo: Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care (*second from right*), pictured with people who draw and care and support alongside staff from the provider Dramatize, which supports adults with learning disabilities after they leave education, offering a wide range of activities including day provisions and employment and life



skills programmes.