# Surrey's flood defences and energy efficiency funding

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

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

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 County Council election delay stirring up a storm

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Surrey's Conservative leader wants to postpone May's poll reckoning

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

# Surrey Police hikes its Council tax share

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

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 Counci**l 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?

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?

"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**

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

A Surrey suburb is up in arms as an 'oustanding' 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 long-term 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

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.