

## A Green Group that won't belt up

26 February 2024



In a comprehensive critique of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's** handling of the Local Plan, a local environmental advocacy group, known as **Epsom Green Belt**, argues there are shortcomings in the council's approach.

In a response to the council's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (reported by the Epsom and Ewell Times [HERE](#)) they assert that the council's failure to provide clear and timely information about changes resulting from public consultation leaves residents in the dark about crucial decisions that will shape the borough's future.

One of the group's key contentions centres around the council's delay in analyzing consultation responses. Despite assurances of ongoing analysis, no outcomes have been made public, leaving residents to speculate about the fate of their feedback. This lack of transparency, the group argues, undermines the democratic process and erodes trust in local governance.

Furthermore, the Group criticizes the council's handling of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC), highlighting concerns about the committee's apparent exclusion from significant decision-making processes. By sidelining the LPPC, the council risks bypassing important checks and balances, raising questions about the integrity of the Local Plan's development.

A central focus of the group's critique is the contentious issue of Green Belt development. They accuse the council of disregarding public opinion and pressing ahead with plans to build on protected Green Belt land without adequately demonstrating the exceptional circumstances required by National Planning Policies. This, they argue, not only threatens valuable green spaces but also reflects a disregard for community sentiment.

In addition to these overarching concerns, the Group points to specific discrepancies in the council's representation of housing needs and affordability. They highlight the council's reliance on inflated housing figures and failure to explore alternative solutions, such as maximizing brownfield sites. This, they argue, calls into question the accuracy and integrity of the data informing the Local Plan.

Epsom Green Belt calls for immediate action from elected councillors to address these concerns and restore public confidence in the Local Plan process. They emphasize the need for transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making to ensure that the interests of residents and the environment are adequately represented.

The full case being argued by Epsom Green Belt can be accessed [HERE](#).

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[Here we go again on the Local Plan?](#)

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## Lessons in slowing down in Surrey

26 February 2024



St Augustine's Abbey in Chilworth, near Guildford Surrey, will open its doors to the public on May 18, 2024, offering a rare insight into the world of **Benedictine monks**. This public talk aims to provide an objective view of the Benedictine way of life, rooted in centuries-old tradition.

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Epsom and Ewell Times seeks to slow down a notch the pace of information in our modern age. We attempt to provide deeper understanding of local news reviving online a tradition lost 20 years ago with the demise of Epsom and Ewells' Herald and Advertiser weekly prints. Benedictine Monks living in the heart of Surrey have kept a slower tradition of existence going for 1500 years!

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The Benedictine Order, founded by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the early 6th century, emerged as a cornerstone of Western monasticism. Benedict's Rule, emphasizing prayer, work, and community life, became the guiding principle for monastic living across Europe. Monasteries under the Benedictine rule became centres of learning, agriculture, and spiritual guidance during the Middle Ages. The order played a pivotal role in preserving knowledge and culture during turbulent times. Benedictine monks contributed significantly to medieval society through their dedication to prayer, scholarship, and service. Today, Benedictine monasticism endures globally, fostering spiritual growth and intellectual pursuits.

The May 18th event will kick off with an optional Holy Roman Catholic Mass at 9 am in the Abbey Church, followed by a talk from 10 am to 11:30 am. Attendees will have the opportunity to delve into the daily rituals and routines of Benedictine monks, including chanting in Latin and the discipline of rising at dawn for prayer, practices that have endured for over 1,500 years.

The event will also explore the relevance of St. Benedict's Rule, written in 530 AD, and its application in modern society. Attendees will gain insights into the motivations driving individuals to embrace the monastic life, characterized by simplicity, contemplation, and service.

In collaboration with the Guildford and District Knights of St Columba, the event aims to be informative for individuals of all ages and backgrounds, regardless of faith. Admission to the talk is by donation, with funds collected to support the monks in their spiritual endeavors.

To secure attendance, interested individuals need to RSVP by emailing [richardatob@gmail.com](mailto:richardatob@gmail.com). This event provides a unique opportunity to gain a deeper

understanding of Benedictine spirituality within the tranquil setting of St Augustine’s Abbey.

St Augustine’s Abbey is located at Sample Oak Lane, Chilworth, Guildford, Surrey GU4 8QR.

For more information, visit <http://www.chilworthbenedictines.com>

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## Here we go again on the Local Plan?

26 February 2024



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has launched a dedicated FAQ section on its website to inform residents about the ongoing development of the borough’s **Local Plan**. According to the Council this initiative aims to provide transparency and dispel any misinformation circulating regarding the plan’s objectives and progress.

The Local Plan holds significant importance in shaping the future of the borough, covering various aspects such as job creation, environmental conservation, leisure facilities, housing sites, and infrastructure enhancements. The Council states that no final decisions have been made regarding policy formulations or site selections. Currently, the council is in the process of reviewing feedback received during the initial public consultation on the draft plan and gathering additional evidence to inform its development.

Councillor **Steven McCormick**, Chair of the Licensing & Planning Policy Committee, (RA Woodcote and Langley) emphasized the complexity and necessity of the Local Plan’s development, stating:

“The development of our Local Plan is as complex as it is vital. We want to make sure that all those who live in, work in and visit the borough have access to the latest information about the Local Plan, to ensure that they are informed and to dispel rumours and myths about the Plan. We encourage everyone to take a look at the FAQs, either on our website or by coming in to the Town Hall and asking for a copy at reception.”

On the key areas of most interest to residents the Council’s position is stated and Epsom and Ewell Times summarises:

### Local Plan Decisions Still Pending

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) has yet to finalize decisions regarding policy formulation and site allocations for the upcoming edition of the Local Plan. Despite ongoing efforts to adhere to the government’s planning framework and reviewing feedback from the Draft Local Plan consultation, no definitive choices have been made at this juncture. The council is actively engaged in compiling a comprehensive evidence base essential for the development of the Proposed Submission Local Plan, also known as the Regulation 19 Local Plan.

### Spatial Strategy Uncertain

Concerns loom over the confirmation of a Spatial Strategy crucial for guiding development across the borough. Originally slated for submission to Surrey County Council for transportation modeling by January 2024, the Spatial Strategy’s confirmation has encountered hurdles. Following member briefings earlier this year, the council has been unable to solidify the strategy, prompting a reevaluation of available options.

### Timeline for Local Plan Decisions

With the evidence base still under development, decisions regarding the Local Plan’s content are slated for later this year. The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) is expected to receive recommendations on the Proposed Submission Local Plan, incorporating site allocations, by November 2024. Subsequently, the LPPC will forward its recommendations to the Full Council for deliberation. Only upon Full Council approval will the plan proceed to another round of public consultation, marking a critical juncture in the decision-making process.

### Data Informing Local Plan Preparation

EEBC has relied on a diverse array of data sources to inform the preparation of the Draft Local Plan. Evidence spanning various thematic areas was gathered and published to support the consultation process. Additionally, ongoing efforts are underway to gather further evidence, with updates expected to be made available on the council’s website upon completion.

### Housing Needs and Requirements

Calculating the housing need for the borough involves employing the Government’s ‘Standard Method,’ which utilizes 2014 Household Growth Projections data. While recent updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) have reaffirmed the use of this method, the draft Local Plan aims to address just over half of the calculated housing need. This draft plan will undergo extensive scrutiny during the independent planning inspector’s examination.

### Current Housing Needs and Challenges

The borough faces challenges in meeting its housing targets, with housing delivery falling short of expectations. Despite efforts to address housing shortages, the Council’s Authority Monitoring Report highlights a deficit in housing delivery. Moreover, the increasing number of households on the housing needs register underscores the urgent need for affordable housing solutions.

### Brownfield Sites and Development

While brownfield sites play a crucial role in meeting development needs, there are concerns about their sufficiency. Although a range of brownfield sites has been considered for development in the next stage of the Local Plan, it is deemed insufficient to meet the borough’s housing and economic requirements.

### Preservation of Industrial Estates

Industrial estates such as Longmead and Kiln Lane are integral to the borough’s employment landscape and are safeguarded against housing development. Recognizing their importance in providing employment opportunities, the draft Local Plan designates these sites as Strategic Employment Sites, prioritizing their protection for employment-generating uses.

### Green Belt Protection

The Green Belt, governed by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), enjoys robust protection against development. However, authorities have the discretion to review and alter Green Belt boundaries under exceptional circumstances, subject to stringent conditions. Despite this flexibility, any proposed changes must demonstrate adherence to outlined criteria, ensuring the enduring preservation of Green Belt land.

The FAQs can be accessed on the council’s website at [www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/local-plan-faqs](http://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/local-plan-faqs).

Members of the public can sign up to receive an alert for future consultations by completing the form at <https://epsom-ewell.inconsult.uk/>.

### Opposition Voices Express Frustration Over Lack of Transparency

Cllr **Julie Morris**, Liberal Democrat group leader (College), expressed frustration over what she perceived as a lack of transparency and decisive action in the development of the Local Plan. She stated: “Some many months after several public protests about the inclusion of sites within the Green Belt, do we finally have

some information about the status of our Local Plan, relatively bland though it is. Weasel words ‘no decision has been made on site selection’ need to be read alongside answers to a FAQ on the council’s website, where it quite clearly says that site options have been given to Surrey County Council (SCC) who are currently completing their transport modelling. These options may not be the final decision, but most councillors in Epsom & Ewell are not even aware of what these options are, so at this point in time SCC probably know more than us. The Liberal Democrat group of councillors remain frustrated and very concerned at the lack of transparency in decision-making from the party in control of the council – the Residents Association group.”

Cllr **Kate Chinn**, Labour group leader (Court), acknowledged the council’s recent efforts to inform residents about the Local Plan’s progress but criticized what she described as a history of secrecy surrounding decision-making processes. She stated: “It is good to see that the Residents Association (RA) councillors are finally starting the process of keeping residents informed on the progress of the local plan. The confidential briefings, which are shrouded in secrecy and leaks of information have fuelled the rumours, myths and conspiracy theories that prevail. With such a huge majority the ruling group should be able to develop a vision to present to residents that enables homes to be built to meet residents’ housing needs. Instead the borough continues to face uncertainty with the RA’s divisions, dither and delay meaning decisions are not made.. As the webpage notes ‘Following member briefings in early 2024, a Spatial Strategy was not able to be confirmed and therefore options are being considered.’

Without a spatial strategy the local plan is in effect paused. The lack of progress is endangering meeting the deadline to present a plan to the planning inspectorate by the 30th June 2025 leaving the council at the continued risk of unplanned, speculative development. The Labour group would happily contribute and work collaboratively to produce a local plan that sensibly addresses the borough’s acute housing need.”

Related reports:

Minister gets heavy on a Local Plan delay

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## Arts plan to surprise Surrey and nation

26 February 2024



In a bold move to redefine Surrey’s cultural landscape, a comprehensive strategy and vision for the years 2024-2034 has been unveiled by The Surrey Cultural Partnership (SCP). The “Surprising Surrey: Cultural Strategy & Vision 2024-2034” outlines an ambitious plan to transform Surrey into a vibrant hub of creativity and innovation, celebrating its rich heritage and fostering community prosperity.

Epsom and Ewell Times summarises the highlights:

### **Vision for 2034:**

The vision for Surrey by 2034 is one of confidence and vibrancy, where the county’s cultural heritage and creativity are celebrated as cornerstones of individual and community wellbeing. Key objectives include improving access to creative experiences, fostering cultural engagement across demographics, supporting creative practitioners, attracting visitors, and boosting investment in cultural activities.

### **Cultural Strategy Highlights:**

The strategy underscores the belief that culture is integral to societal well-being, offering benefits such as enhanced quality of life, improved mental health, and economic growth. It aims to address existing disparities in cultural access and investment across Surrey, recognizing the county’s diverse needs and potential.

### **Challenges and Opportunities:**

Despite its affluent reputation, Surrey grapples with pockets of deprivation and underinvestment in cultural infrastructure. The strategy highlights the urgent need to secure funding and support from both local and national stakeholders to address these challenges and realize its goals.

### **Priorities and Action Plan:**

The strategy outlines four key priorities: ensuring culture is accessible to all, fostering resilient communities, enhancing county-wide cultural infrastructure, and supporting creativity as an economic driver. An action plan details specific initiatives, including the establishment of cultural hubs, support for creative enterprises, and community engagement programs.

### **Monitoring and Financial Implications:**

To ensure accountability and progress, the Surrey Cultural Partnership (SCP) will monitor the plan’s implementation and evaluate its impact through key performance indicators. Financially, the plan anticipates a requirement of approximately £2 million over the next decade, to be sourced from various public and private funding channels.

### **Next Steps:**

SCP will establish a steering group comprising stakeholders from diverse sectors to oversee the plan’s execution. Additionally, workshops will be conducted to recruit Culture Champions and mobilize community support for the initiative.

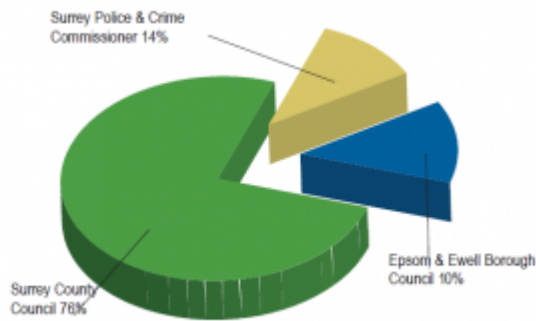
The unveiling of the “Surprising Surrey: Cultural Strategy & Vision 2024-2034” marks a significant step towards transforming Surrey into a dynamic cultural destination, where creativity thrives, and communities flourish.

Surrey University’s Professor Caroline Scarles, Professor of Technology and Society, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Director of Visit Surrey, said: “It has been a privilege to work with the Surrey Cultural Partnership to develop this strategy that brings together the wide range of vibrant and inspiring cultural leaders, organisations and communities across the county. It is a strategy that has the collaborative voices of the cultural sector as its very foundation. It provides the collective voice and vision for capturing the diversity, drive, and ambition of the county and recognises the central role that culture plays not only for the economy but also for inclusion, diversity, health, and wellbeing.”

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## No budging on Council budget

26 February 2024



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council met for two hours Tuesday 13th February to debate the proposed budget and Council tax increase for 2024/2025. Councillors received a 288 page report containing all the facts and figures. All the recommendations were approved.

It boils down to this:

A. Epsom and Ewell’s share of Council Tax goes up the equivalent of 2.99% – the maximum the law allows. (£6.57 for a Band D property – the most populous in the Borough).

B. Councillors’ basic allowance goes up 50%, from £4031.70 to £6081.11. Chairs and Vice-chairs of committees get additional allowances ranging from 30% to 100% of the basic members’ allowance.

C. Council staff salaries will increase 6%.

Reacting to the budget, leader of the Labour Group Cllr. **Kate Chinn** (Court Ward) said: “I’m sure the residents of Epsom and Ewell will have noted the residents’ association are putting up council tax, part of which will pay for the huge pay rise they voted through for themselves last night. However, the cost of the pay rise is relatively small when compared to the huge amounts spent on temporary housing for homeless people due to this council’s abject failure to build social housing.”

During the debate she said: “When we look at the staff for the council getting a 6% pay rise and having had raises very much less than inflation over the last five, six, seven, maybe even longer more years, I feel very uncomfortable awarding myself this large pay rise. It doesn’t seem right. It doesn’t sit comfortably with my values.”

Cllr **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) said: “Our staff get an annual pay review. Reading through this report, councillors have not taken an increase in their allowance for the past 10 years. So whereas our staff have been getting a regular review, it may well not hit the rate of inflation, they have been getting an increase. We as councillors have not. So unfortunately, whether Councillor Chinn accepts the point, the reason for such a large increase is to catch up with the choices that this Council has made not to accept that remuneration in the past.”

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town Ward) proposed the 2.99% increase in EEBC’s Council Tax and said in a wide ranging speech: “The current government has been less than helpful in creating stability and allowing good financial forecasting”. After noting several changes of top Council officers he said: “It’s not often you see so much change in a senior management team in such a short time. Everyone is going to need time and space to readjust, learn to work effectively and efficiently together to bring both stability to the council and its workforce, and to have the confidence to introduce changes and take the best advantage of opportunities that arise.”

On the budget he remarked: “Government has also capped for many years the increase in council tax, which traditionally had been the way to meet increased costs. We have had to use reserves to balance the budget over the last few years, and reserves don’t last forever. We still have a small budget gap and are forecasting the use of reserves to fill that gap, but we’re also taking steps to increase revenue as well as making savings.”

On homelessness he said: “Without adequate funding, we cannot achieve what we set out to do, and homelessness will continue to rise. A particularly worrying trend is the increase in young people who find themselves homeless. If the government is serious about reducing homelessness, they need to fund local authorities to enable them to achieve this.”

For the LibDems Cllr **Alison Kelly** (Stamford) touched on a wide variety of topics: “Why has a rewrite of the rules for spending the community infrastructure levy funds money meant that we’ve had to cancel a 12-month period for spending any of it? Sadly, to an outside observer, the answer seems to be that we can’t spend any money as we need the interest to fund the general services. This is not sustainable in avoiding the filing of notice of bankruptcy as has happened elsewhere.” She added: “Many councils are in danger of bankruptcy, and recent league tables show that we are mid-table with nearly £800 of debt per person. The Resident Association plan to resolve this seems to be the anticipated £500,000 increase in revenue from car parks, aspiration at best and a fantasy at worst, as this comes even though we expect to be nearly £200,000 down on last year’s budgeted income.”

She used the opportunity once more to have a go at Council secrecy: “Our Council group feels there are some unfathomable instances of resorting to allegedly legally privileged information which is then weaponized to keep an entire topic secret. There is no secret about needing to review the sites available to developers as part of the local plan, and there would be almost nil cost in keeping the public abreast of how the in-house meetings on this topic are progressing.”

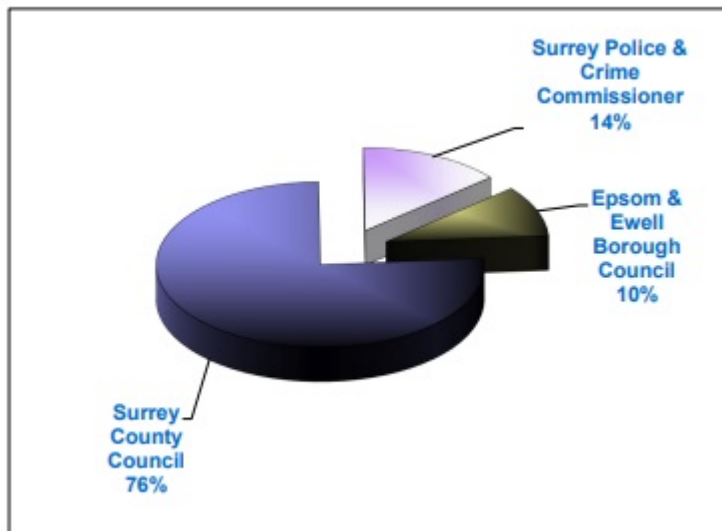
For Labour Cllr **Chris Ames** (Court Ward) said: “I understand it’s regularly alleged at these times that Labour doesn’t understand the need to find more money to meet the needs of residents. We absolutely do, but we don’t think it should be done by transferring budget pressures to the people we are elected to serve. The cost of living crisis hasn’t gone away just because the current inflation figures have fallen. Not only is the current 4 or 5% still far too high, it means that over the last year, prices rose over and above where they were after a period of double-digit inflation.

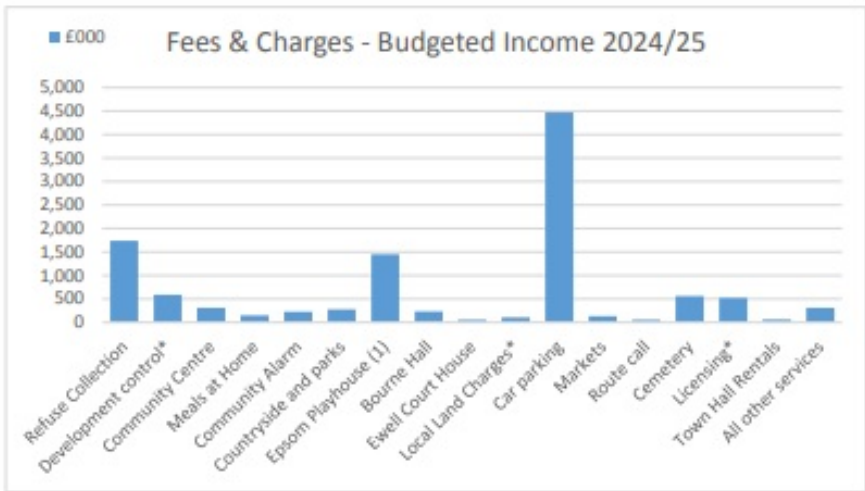
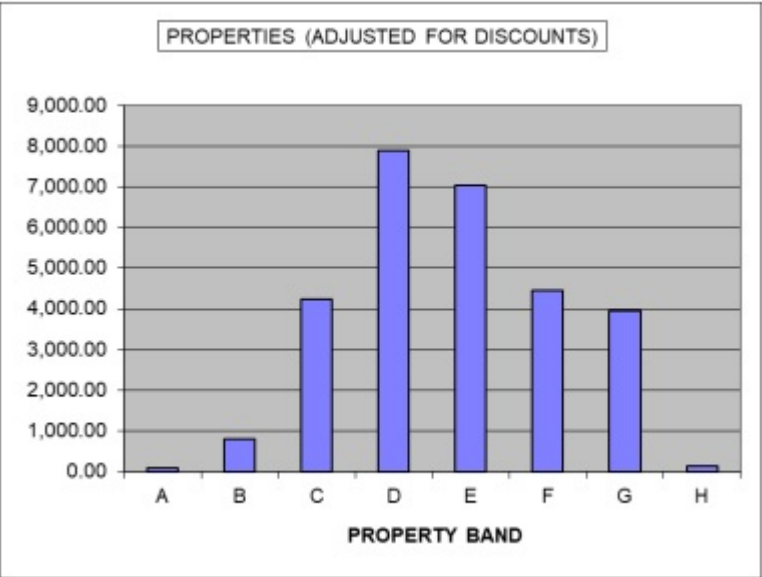
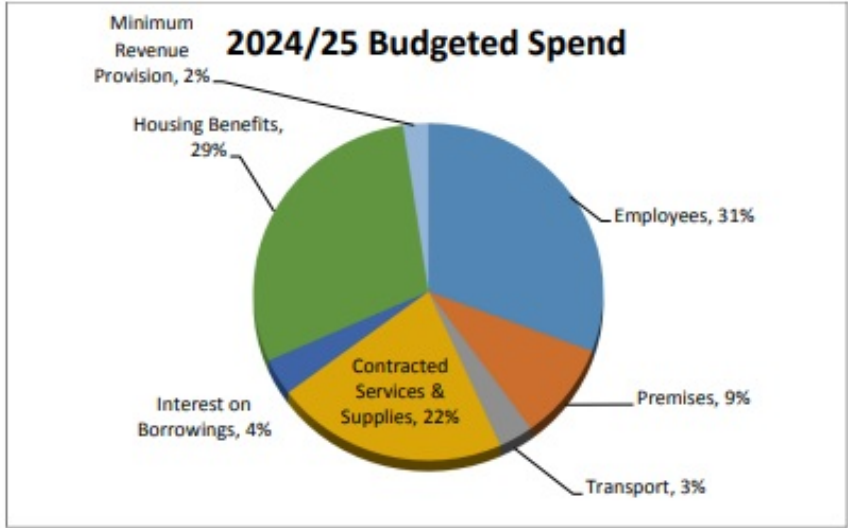
We still have large numbers of residents unable to feed their families or relying on food banks to do so. We still have residents who lie awake at night wondering how they’re going to pay their bills, their rents, or mortgages.”

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) said: “Financial mismanagement has serious consequences, which we have witnessed on multiple occasions in recent times. However, we should err on the side of caution. We’re introducing measures which may prove to be counterproductive.

As stated in the report, the major challenge is the delivery of the £1.4 million of additional income and savings and finding a further 0.5 million reduction in council’s net exponential by 2027/28. However, the council has acquired a number of commercial properties both within and outside the borough through borrowing. As of the end of 2022/23, the council’s external debt totalled £64.4 million, and the interest paid to service this debt was £1.6 million last year. We’re still facing economic uncertainty. Should we really be taking or amassing more borrowing debts in this current climate?”

Here are some graphics from the report that may put some matters in perspective:





The Council continues to benefit from its property investments and car parking income to maintain its finances in relative good order compared with other Boroughs in Surrey. Several of which face serious financial challenges: E.g., : Woking, Guildford and Spelthorne.

For 2023/2024 Epsom and Ewell’s share of Council tax was third lowest in the County.

2023-2024 COUNCIL TAX (average per dwelling and Band D for 2 adults)						
SURREY DISTRICT	£					
	Surrey County Council	Surrey Police	District Council Charge (Band D)	Average Parish Precept (Band D)	Local Average (Band D)	Average Council Tax (Band D)
Runnymede	1,675.08	310.57	184.92	0.00	184.92	2,170.57
Spelthorne	1,675.08	310.57	216.04	0.00	216.04	2,201.69
Epsom & Ewell	1,675.08	310.57	219.60	0.00	219.60	2,205.25
Mole Valley	1,675.08	310.57	199.19	40.44	239.63	2,225.28
Guildford	1,675.08	310.57	192.41	60.90	253.31	2,238.96
Elmbridge	1,675.08	310.57	243.35	14.15	257.50	2,243.15
Surrey Heath	1,675.08	310.57	240.65	21.54	262.19	2,247.84
Woking	1,675.08	310.57	263.12	0.00	263.12	2,248.77
Tandridge	1,675.08	310.57	237.88	28.95	266.83	2,252.48
Waverley	1,675.08	310.57	201.64	75.49	277.13	2,262.78
Reigate & Banstead	1,675.08	310.57	249.71	38.74	288.45	2,274.10

- Related reports:
- “Audit and Scrutiny” under scrutiny
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## 2 years on Epsom to gather in solidarity with Ukraine

26 February 2024



The Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network (EERN) and Surrey Stands with Ukraine (SSWU) are calling upon the community to join them in a special gathering on Saturday February 24th at 11 am in the **Market Place in Epsom**. This gathering marks the solemn second anniversary of the commencement of the war in Ukraine.

The local Ukrainian choir, **Renaissance**, will render the Ukrainian National Anthem. Attendees will have the opportunity to engage with Ukrainian residents regarding the ongoing situation in Ukraine and to learn how they can extend support to the Ukrainian community within Epsom & Ewell.

The Mayor of Epsom & Ewell, Cllr. **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court), will attend. The event will foster a sense of unity and solidarity with the Ukrainian population residing in and around Epsom.

“We are deeply moved by the outpouring of support from the Epsom community for Ukrainian refugees,” said **Jo Sherring**, Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network Lead. “This gathering is an opportunity for us to stand together in solidarity with our Ukrainian friends and reaffirm our commitment to supporting them as they rebuild their lives.”

“It is important for us to get together on this sad date to commemorate those who lost their lives in the war, to thank our supporters, defenders, volunteers, and the British people who gave shelter to us at these hard times for Ukraine.” said **Nataliia Zadorizhna**, pianist and director of the Renaissance choir who has been living in Ashted with her 11 year old daughter since May 2022. “It is an enormous privilege to stay in the UK and to be surrounded by such noble, caring and generous people.”

Epsom has exhibited remarkable solidarity with Ukraine since the outbreak of the war, with numerous families opening their doors to Ukrainian refugees and contributing substantial amounts towards humanitarian aid. The community has banded together, with volunteers actively aiding refugees in assimilating into the local fabric.

All members of the Epsom community are warmly encouraged to attend this event, which promises to be a meaningful demonstration of support for the Ukrainian populace.

For further inquiries, please contact:

Nina Kaye: [nina@goodcompany.org.uk](mailto:nina@goodcompany.org.uk) | 07778 406834



English classes for Ukrainians and other refugees in Epsom.

### **Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network (EERN)**

Established in 2015, operates as a community-driven organization in close collaboration with the Epsom & Ewell Borough Council. It operates under the auspices of the charity **Good Company (Surrey)**, with a mission rooted in compassion, solidarity, and inclusivity. EERN extends support to refugees and asylum seekers within Epsom and its environs, facilitating their integration into the community through various initiatives including employment guidance, educational support, cultural orientation, and free English language lessons.



Epsom and Ewell residents welcome Ukrainians fleeing war.

Surrey Stands with Ukraine (SSWU)

At the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, a collective of British and Ukrainian residents from Epsom joined forces to establish Surrey Stands with Ukraine (SSWU), a humanitarian relief project dedicated to aiding Ukraine. SSWU provides support to both the Ukrainian populace within Ukraine and those residing in the UK by gathering and distributing medical supplies and other essential aid. Operating under the registered charity **Harrop HR Missions Ltd.**, SSWU ensures that 100% of all donations are directed towards supporting the people of Ukraine, with no fees or wages deducted for volunteers or trustees.

EERN and SSWU are very grateful for the magnificent support provided for their efforts by **The Ashley Centre** Epsom, through its donation of the use of a suite of offices used for processing donations, English classes and an advice centre. Also to **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** that has waived the imposition of business rates.

Related reports:

- Epsom and Ewell Borough of Sanctuary
- Hosts of Ukrainian refugees appreciated
- Flight of refugees: history repeating?
- Breaking the mould for Ukrainian refugees
- Local refugee cash appeal

Epsom 3rd in a 2024 “Best Places to Live”

26 February 2024



In the latest edition of national estate agents “Garrington’s Best Places to Live” index for 2024, Epsom has clinched the third spot after an assessment of rankings in a range of categories.

Garrington’s evaluation of **over 1400 locales** across England and Wales underscores Epsom’s strengths in various key aspects, including heritage, wellbeing, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and housing affordability.

With its longstanding association with the prestigious Derby and a rich historical backdrop, Epsom ranks high in heritage, landing at 90th place. Its commitment to community wellbeing, supported by a serene natural environment, earns it a respectable 282nd position in this category.

Moreover, Epsom’s strategic location near London, coupled with its excellent schools and robust job market, positions it favorably in terms of employment prospects and connectivity, securing the 99th spot in Garrington’s evaluation.

While property prices in Epsom reflect its status, with the average family home costing £810,809, a modest 0.4% increase in the past year underscores its resilience amidst market fluctuations.

According to Garringtons: “As the real estate landscape evolves, Epsom maintains its reputation as a stable and desirable locale, offering residents a blend of tradition, convenience, and quality of life.”

Jonathan Hopper, CEO of Garrington Property Finders, emphasizes the practical significance of the 2024 ranking, stating, “As the market stabilizes and borrowing costs decrease, buyers are re-evaluating their options. Garrington’s guide offers insights to help individuals identify locales that meet their needs and preferences.”

“Epsom remains attractive to homebuyers with its solid fundamentals and promising prospects for a fulfilling lifestyle.”

Related reports:

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- Anchored in reason on local housing need?

Ada of Surrey inspires big AI project

26 February 2024



Drawing inspiration from **Ada Lovelace**, who resided in Surrey, a computing pioneer and translator who overcame societal barriers in the 19th century, the “ADA network” based at **Surrey University** aims to usher in a transformative era of AI research focused on digital inclusion.

**Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace** (*née Byron*; 10 December 1815 – 27 November 1852) was an English mathematician and writer, chiefly known for her work on Charles Babbage’s proposed mechanical general-purpose computer, the Analytical Engine. She was the first to recognise that the machine had applications beyond pure calculation. In 1835, she married the first Earl of Lovelace, becoming Lady King. They had a home in Ockham Park, Surrey.

The **University of Surrey** has been granted a multi-million-pound award from the **Leverhulme Trust** to spearhead a groundbreaking initiative aimed at ensuring equitable access to artificial intelligence (AI)-powered digital media. This ambitious project, named the Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Network for AI-Enabled Digital Accessibility (**ADA**), will receive a grant of £2.15 million over eight years.

Professor **Sabine Braun**, ADA Director at the University of Surrey, emphasized the importance of digital media accessibility, stating that it is pivotal for engaging with various aspects of life, from public information to entertainment. The ADA project aims to leverage AI technology to make digital content accessible to individuals of all ages, languages, cognitive and sensory abilities, and physical mobility.

In today’s digital landscape, interacting with digital content involves complex sensory inputs. However, accessibility issues arise when individuals cannot access content in their preferred language or format. While traditional methods like text subtitles or simplified versions have been used to address these challenges, the sheer volume of digital content necessitates AI-driven solutions.

The ADA project seeks to advance AI-driven accessibility solutions by integrating insights from the humanities and social sciences to better understand user needs.

The Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI (PAI) will host the ADA project, aligning with its mission to advance AI from a human-centric perspective. The project will draw expertise from three renowned research centers at the University of Surrey: the Centre for Translation Studies (CTS), the Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing (CVSSP), and the Nature Inspired Computer and Engineering Research Group (NICE).

CTS will contribute expertise in language and translation technology to improve media accessibility, while CVSSP will leverage its world-leading AI and computer vision capabilities. NICE will provide specific expertise in knowledge-driven AI and machine translation for under-resourced languages.

Professor **Adrian Hilton**, Director of PAI and CVSSP, highlighted ADA’s vision to establish a hub for high-quality research training in AI-enabled digital accessibility. By collaborating with Surrey’s Digital World Research Centre (DWRC), Digital Societies, and Brain and Behaviour research groups, the ADA project aims to drive meaningful advancements in AI accessibility, ensuring that media services are accessible and inclusive for all individuals and society.

Image: Daguerreotype by Antoine Claudet and Surrey University’s newest lab that has 200 machines which are each equipped with a Nvidia Quadro P4000 Graphics Card: useful for intensive jobs that require multiple cores in areas such as data science, AI and deep learning.

## LibDems call “Love All” for local tennis

26 February 2024



With charges pending for using **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** tennis courts the local LibDems ask for free sport for low income players.

In a bid to bolster recreational opportunities and promote an active lifestyle within the community, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has joined forces with the **Lawn Tennis Association** (LTA) to revitalize public tennis courts across the borough.

The LTA has pledged £26,650 towards the refurbishment of a dozen tennis courts spread across key recreational areas including Auriol Park, Alexandra Recreation Ground, Court Recreation Ground, Gibraltar Recreation Ground and Poole Road Recreation Ground.

The initiative encompasses a comprehensive upgrade plan featuring state-of-the-art gate access technology, the implementation of a user-friendly online booking platform, and court enhancements geared towards ensuring top-tier facilities for local residents.

Beyond the infrastructural improvements, the partnership also promises an array of activities catered to all age groups and skill levels. Weekly complimentary tennis sessions, inclusive of equipment provision, will eliminate barriers to entry, fostering inclusivity and accessibility. Additionally, Local Tennis Leagues will host friendly competitions, promoting a sociable and active lifestyle within the community.

The Council will roll out a ‘pay as you play’ scheme across all tennis courts in the borough, slated for implementation in the coming year. The generated revenue will be reinvested to maintain and enhance the borough’s tennis infrastructure, ensuring its longevity for future generations.

Cllr **John Beckett**, (RA Auriol Ward) Chair of the Environment Committee, expressed enthusiasm over the collaboration, emphasizing its significance in bolstering community well-being and fostering a culture of physical activity. He lauded the forthcoming free coaching sessions as pivotal in diversifying tennis participation across socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Julie Porter**, Chief Operating Officer at the LTA, echoed Beckett’s sentiments, highlighting the project’s alignment with the UK Government and LTA’s Parks Tennis Project. She affirmed the commitment to providing enduring tennis facilities, thus broadening access to the sport.

In response to the impending introduction of charges for tennis court usage, Cllr **James Lawrence**, (LibDem College Ward) has launched [a petition](#) advocating for free access for disadvantaged groups. The petition proposes complimentary access for children during weekends and school holidays, as well as free usage for households receiving council tax support and other benefits.

The petition underscores the importance of preserving equitable access to public amenities, particularly for vulnerable segments of the population. As the council deliberates on the matter, stakeholders await a decision that balances fiscal responsibility with social inclusivity, ensuring that tennis remains an accessible pursuit for all within the community.

Related reports:

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# Surrey’s Tory MPs exiting the County

26 February 2024



**Kwasi Kwarteng** the Conservative MP for Spelthorne has just joined four other of his Party’s Surrey colleagues in announcing he will not stand at the upcoming General Election. Surrey has 11 constituencies and all are held by Conservatives.

With Paul Beresford MP for Mole Valley, Dominic Raab MP for Esher and Walton, Crispin Blunt MP for Reigate and Banstead and our own **Chris Grayling** MP for **Epsom and Ewell**, all having confirmed they are not going to run, this leaves 6 Surrey Conservative MPs still standing.

One can expect Michael Gove MP for Surrey Heath and Jeremy Hunt MP for South-West Surrey, who serve in the Cabinet, to seek re-election. Leaving Jonathan Lord MP for Woking, Ben Spencer MP for Runnymede and Weybridge, Angela Richardson MP for Guildford and Claire Coutinho MP for East Surrey assumed to be still up for the fight.

Epsom and Ewell Conservatives have already put in place their new prospective Parliamentary Candidate, **Mhairi Fraser**, an anti-corruption lawyer.

She will be challenged by **Helen Maguire** of the Liberal Democrats, **Gina Miller** of the True and Fair Party and **Steve Mckenna** of the Green Party. Labour has yet to select its Prospective Parliamentary Candidate.

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