

Mole Valley backs maximum council tax rise as deficit looms

10 February 2026



Council tax in Mole Valley is expected to rise by the highest possible amount - and still leave the district in financial deficit and relying on reserves to cover the gap. The decision was recommended at the Tuesday, February 3, meeting of the Mole Valley District Council's executive committee ahead of its expected rubber stamping later this month, and the increase will go hand in hand with the 4.99 per cent hike imposed by Surrey County Council.

This is the final full year for many public bodies in Surrey before they are merged into two mega authorities, and Mole Valley's budget comes amid warnings it could be among a number of councils to pass on a deficit to the newly merged East Surrey next year.

This year's budget shortfall, projected to be about £1.5m, is to be covered by existing reserves and will allow the council to continue funding projects close to its heart including free summer activities for children, the Mole Valley Employment Hub, and a grant to Citizens Advice. The biggest loss in projected revenue is expected to come from the enforced closure of Dorking Halls during its costly multi-million pound refurbishment.

Councillor Andrew Matthews, portfolio holder for finance, said: "This budget is unlike previous years. Instead of setting a medium term plan, with local government reorganisation taking effect in April 2027, we are presenting a single year budget alongside indicative figures for the two years beyond to support planning for the new East Surrey Council. The council is forecasting that it will cost £14.3m to fund services next year with £12.8m income. The shortfall will be covered by using £1.5m of reserves."

Part of the shortfall, he said, was due to the revenue drop off caused by the long closure of Dorking Halls while it undergoes refurbishment.

The 2.99 per cent increase in council tax will now be put before full council for formal approval and would see Mole Valley's share for band D properties rise from about £211 to £217 a year. Mole Valley's take is about 9 per cent of a person's annual council tax bill, with Surrey County Council accounting for 75 per cent. The rest is distributed between Surrey Police at 14 per cent and any parish council. Currently band D homeowners in non-parished areas pay £2,395.20 - this will now go up.

Car parking within the council-owned sites will continue to be free on evenings and Sundays.

Looking forward, Cllr Andrew Matthews said: "The financial environment remains uncertain. Inflationary pressures, rising costs, and the transition to a new unitary authority means that the medium term projections for 2027 and 2028 show that the new East Surrey Council will inherit a predicted budget deficit from Mole Valley." He said this was in part due to changes in central government funding that gave areas less able to raise money - those with fewer high council tax band homes - a larger share than those with larger tax bases. He expected other councils would be in a similar boat and could have financial implications for the new council going forward.

He told the meeting: "This is not unique. Other councils forming a new East Surrey Council are also predicting a potential budget deficit in their projections. This is a key risk for sustainability of services under the new Surrey Council."

Cllr Paula Keay said the employment hub played a vital role in the community and was important to fund. She said: "I'm delighted that this one off revenue spend has gone through. It will ensure the long-term sustainability of such an important facility. We know there is no job centre anywhere in Mole Valley and it provides a valuable service to both employers and local people seeking work and skills."

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Mole Valley District Council offices in Dorking. (Credit: Google Street View)

Surrey Police precept rising

10 February 2026

**Surrey PCC**

The average household in Surrey could pay more than £350 a year towards policing after a £15 council tax hike was given the go-ahead. The police precept - the portion of council tax that funds Surrey Police - will rise from £338 to £352 a year for the average Band D home from April 2026, a 4.4 per cent increase from last year.

The rise was backed by the Surrey Police and Crime Panel on February 4, despite a sharp debate over whether residents can afford it. Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Lisa Townsend said the increase was needed to prevent services from deteriorating, warning that without the full rise people could face slower answers to 999 calls, longer waits for officers to attend incidents, and delays in forensic investigations.

“For every £1 on the precept, about £0.5 million goes into the Force,” she told the panel. “That equates to around 15 police staff or officers.” Ms Townsend said Surrey Police has become “one of the most improved forces in the country” in recent years, with more visible neighbourhood policing and better performance on crimes such as burglary and vehicle theft, but rising demand and increasing costs mean those improvements are at risk.

She said: “Improvements we are seeing today have only been possible because of previous decisions to increase the policing precept. Those decisions have allowed SP to invest in officers, staff, systems and technology that are now delivering results on the ground.” According to the PCC, on an average day the force handles almost 1,700 contacts from the public and sends vehicles to almost 250 incidents. Each day 216 crimes are recorded, 33 relate to violence against women and girls, 56 are assault, and armed response officers are called out 16 times a week.

She added: “The improvements achieved so far simply cannot be sustained” without further funding.

Some councillors challenged the move. Cllr Richard Wilson said many residents in his area are struggling to afford food, heating and rent, questioned whether it was the right time to increase bills, and asked whether Surrey, as a relatively low-crime county, could manage with a smaller force.

Kelvin Menon, chief finance officer for the PCC’s office, said Surrey receives one of the lowest levels of government grant in England, making it more reliant on council tax, and warned that cutting funding would mean difficult choices about which services to scale back. He argued that although Surrey may be a ‘low-crime’ area, it is the police keeping it that way, asking: “What level of crime are people willing to accept?” He added: “The level of poverty in the country is possibly not the fault of the police precept.”

The PCC repeatedly assured the panel that Surrey Police has already delivered about £90m in savings over the past decade. Even with the tax rise, the force still needs to find £5.5m in further savings this year and more in the years ahead, with an overspend of around £1m this year driven largely by overtime costs.

A public consultation found 57 per cent of respondents supported a £14 increase, the maximum allowed at the time. More than 2,400 people took part, although this was highlighted as a small proportion of Surrey’s 1.3m residents.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Surrey Police and Crime Officer, Lisa Townsend, at the Surrey Police and Crime panel. (Credit: Surrey County Council webcam)

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council claws back millions to balance books before government shakeup

10 February 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has closed a multi-million pound budget gap as it gets ready to be absorbed into a new unitary authority next year.

Just months ago, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council was forecasting a £5m shortfall over three years, including a £1.9m gap for 2026/27 alone. But a combination of savings, streamlining services and additional government funding has reduced the projected deficit to just over half a million pounds across the same period.

Councillors were told at a Financial Strategy Advisory Group on January 30, the authority has now set a balanced budget for 2026/27. This is a legal requirement before local government reorganisation sees the borough council replaced by the new East Surrey unitary authority. Finance officers said the work ensures the new council will inherit a more stable financial position.

Bridging a £5m gap

Last July, the council warned of a growing funding gap driven by rising costs and pressure on services. Since then, a series of changes have reshaped the picture. These include:

- New efficiency savings across services
- The removal or reduction of some planned spending contributions
- Additional funding through the government's Fair Funding Review
- Extra income linked to national waste and recycling reforms

Together, these changes have cut the medium-term deficit from £5.063 million to £579,000.

Although the government's fair funding review has been slammed as a disaster across the rest of Surrey, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is emerging as victor. According to the report, areas with high homelessness and temporary housing demand for those at risk of homelessness have received a 20 per cent increase in funds. Leading officers to label the boost as "favourable" compared to other councils across the country.

Officers told councillors the financial environment remains challenging, with continued pressure from temporary accommodation costs, agency staffing and inflation, but said the authority now has a clear plan to manage those risks.

Council tax rise still part of the plan

Despite the improved position, councillors have backed plans to increase council tax by 2.98 per cent next year, the maximum allowed without a local referendum. Officers said the increase, worth £6.93 per year for a Band D property, had always been built into long-term financial planning and was necessary to maintain stability.

Freezing council tax would leave a £291,000 hole in the budget that would need to be filled by service cuts.

Why balancing the books now matters

Although Epsom & Ewell will cease to exist as a standalone council after reorganisation, it is still required to pass on a clear and accurate financial position to the successor authority. Council documents state that producing a medium-term financial strategy remains essential so the incoming unitary council understands "future commitments as they stand."

By closing much of the budget gap now, the borough council reduces the risk of the new authority inheriting an immediate financial crisis.

Ongoing pressures remain

The council warned that financial risks have not disappeared. Rising homelessness costs, inflation in contracts and uncertainty over income streams such as business rates continue to pose challenges.

However, councillors were told the authority has identified actions and savings to keep the budget balanced for the coming year. Final approval of the budget will be made by the Full Council on February 10.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Surrey County Council budget approved

10 February 2026



Council tax bills in Surrey will rise by almost five per cent after councillors approved its final budget.

Members of Surrey County Council green-lit its last ever budget at a full council meeting on February 3. This is the county's final before it is dissolved into two unitary authorities under local government reorganisation.

Councillors have approved a 2.99 per cent council tax rise plus a 2 per cent adult social care levy from April 2026, the maximum allowed. For a typical Band D household, that means paying £7.67 more per month.

Why is council tax going up?

The rise comes after the Government announced a new three-year funding deal for councils from 2026 to 2029. While ministers say councils will see more 'spending power', much of that increase depends on councils raising tax locally. So, no extra money will come from Westminster.

Surrey's bosses say changes under the Government's 'fair funding' reforms mean the county will lose significant national funding in the coming years.

Council leader Cllr Tim Oliver said residents were being asked to pay more just to maintain services. "We cannot accept a model where residents will pay more each year to, at best, stand still. That is a government, political decision and one which this council has no control over," he said.

He added that the council would continue lobbying ministers for a better deal. "Long-term sustainability requires a fairer national settlement. This is a clear message to the government: we will do our part, now fund us fairly."

The council's finance chief warned Surrey is set to lose more than £180m in government funding over the next three years. He said: "Even with maximum council tax rises, we're still facing a funding gap of over £100m by 2028/29."

What is the money being spent on?

Despite the challenging situation, Surrey bosses said they have tried to protect frontline, people-facing services, despite the financial squeeze.

They highlighted:

- Adult social care changes focused on helping people stay independent, receiving safe and compassionate care
- Improvements to support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including more local provision and transport
- Core services such as road maintenance, potholes and libraries

Spending on adult social care will increase by more than 5 per cent, with a focus on helping people stay independent for longer.

There is also continued investment in children's services and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including funding for more local specialist school places and children's homes. Capital spending of £297m is planned next year, covering areas such as highways maintenance, school places, SEND provision and adult social care accommodation.

Cllr Oliver said: "We know households remain under real pressure from the cost of living. We do not take decisions lightly on council tax." He added there is a wide range of support available to residents struggling.

Political opposition voices concerns

Opposition councillors pushed back on the leader's claims the budget ensures 'no one is left behind'. They said the budget does not go far enough to fix deep-rooted problems, especially in children's services.

Leader of the Labour group, Cllr Robert Evans, described the budget as a "one-year sticking plaster", pointing in particular to the growing crisis in SEND provision. "This isn't just an accounting problem, children are missing important years of education."

Cllr Catherine Powell, Residents' Association and Independent Group leader, said social care remains the biggest pressure on the council's finances and called for more support for foster carers, despite plans for more children's homes.

Leader of the Green Party Group, Cllr Jonathan Essex, said the capital programme to build more special needs school places was still “playing catch-up”, adding: “Inaction is costing us £20 million a year.” Meanwhile, Cllr Liz Townsend (Liberal Democrat) said some promised investments amounted to “false hope”.

The report warns of major financial risks beyond next year. Demand for social care continues to rise sharply, while inflation and interest rate pressures remain uncertain.

One of the biggest long-term concerns is the soaring deficit linked to SEND provision. Surrey’s high needs education deficit is forecast to reach around £309m by March 2027. While this is currently kept off the council’s main balance sheet by a temporary government accounting rule (safety valve agreement with the high needs block), finance officers describe it as a serious national issue that threatens many councils’ financial stability.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Bit of monkey business in Epsom’s Town Hall Chamber

10 February 2026



A meeting of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 22nd January saw councillors approve a new schedule of planning fees and charges for 2026/27, despite repeated concerns being raised during the meeting about the absence of planning officers, gaps in supporting information, and the committee’s ability to scrutinise what it was being asked to approve.

The committee was considering fees for discretionary planning services, including Planning Performance Agreements and tree-related services, rather than nationally set statutory planning application fees.

Early in the discussion, councillors were told that questions on planning matters would need to be answered after the meeting. Chair **Peter O’Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) explained this was because no planning officers were present.

One of the first issues raised concerned retrospective planning applications. Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) recalled that councillors had previously discussed introducing higher charges to discourage developers from building first and seeking permission later.

“We get a lot of developers playing the game... trying to do developments without planning and then getting caught and putting in retrospective applications,” he said, adding that he was disappointed not to see such a charge included.

The officer response was that the matter would need to be taken away and clarified with planning colleagues.

During the same exchange, Cllr **Humphrey Reynolds** (RA West Ewell) interjected that “the worst culprit is Hobbledown... application after application retrospectively,” referring to the local visitor attraction.

Concerns then turned to the scale and transparency of proposed discretionary fees. Cllr **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College) questioned why discretionary fees were rising by 4.8 per cent, above the headline inflation rate, and whether councillors had sufficient information to justify approving them.

An officer explained that the increase followed the council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy, which sets fees at CPI plus one per cent, using September inflation figures.

A more sustained exchange followed over officer hourly rates, particularly for tree-related services. Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) calculated that the proposed hourly rate for a tree officer – £133 per hour – implied an equivalent daily rate of over £1,000. “That’s an extraordinary amount of money to charge,” he said, adding that residents as well as developers were affected by these fees.

An Officer responded that the hourly rates were not based on salary alone and reflected overheads, travel time and the need to maintain regulatory services alongside discretionary work. “These are the prices that we charge for the services we provide,” she said, adding that councils were effectively competing with the private sector for this type of work.”

However, when pressed on the specific breakdown of what residents receive for certain charges – including a £550 fee to plant a tree – officers acknowledged they could not provide detailed explanations during the meeting and would need to come back with written responses.

At one point, Chair Peter O’Donovan cut short the line of questioning, telling councillors: “That’s our charge. People can take it or not use it.”

Cllr Coley responded that this was not always the case, noting that some services, such as tree-related consents, could only be authorised by the council.

Questions were also raised about whether councillors had been given comparative data showing how Epsom and Ewell's charges stack up against neighbouring boroughs. Officers said some benchmarking had been carried out but accepted that "it's difficult to compare like for like" because councils offer services in different ways.

Later in the meeting, Cllr Freeman drew attention to newly introduced charges for primate licences, jokingly asking whether the borough was "expecting an invasion from Planet of the Apes". Officers were unable to explain the origin of the charge at the meeting and undertook to respond later.

Despite the unresolved questions, the committee voted to approve the fees and charges as presented.

After the meeting Cllr Freeman told the Epsom & Ewell Times his view the debate left councillors and viewers "feeling that relevant evidence was not provided to committee members when making their decision", particularly given that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is due to be abolished in 2027 as part of local government reorganisation.

"The implication that issues could be looked at 'next time' rather misses the point," he wrote. "There may not be a next time."

.
.

Sam Jones - Reporter

.



.
.

PS If you wish to keep a monkey or other primate the fee is £450

.
.
.
.

Independent view of Ewell's Bourne Hall

10 February 2026



BBC LDRS reports: Up to £359,000 could be spent on rejuvenating Ewell's Bourne Hall Museum under new plans but opposition councillors have stressed that key information on the decision has been made available too late.

An independent report into the museum has now been published, laying out both the problems and the potential at the popular local attraction. The document says the museum could have a strong future, but only if the council invests money, improves how it is run and does a much better job of attracting visitors and funding.

Councillors voted earlier in January to back plans to improve the museum instead of closing it or leaving it as it is. However, no money has actually been approved yet: the decision on whether to release up to £359,000 is expected in March.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) says councillors should have seen the full report before they agreed to support the plans in principle. "Problems with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's secrecy and reluctant transparency are well documented," he said. "Even the council's auditors call it out in reports. Refusing to share an LGA report with committee members when they make a decision is another demonstration of the instinct to cover up bad news."

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court), Leader of the Labour Group, agreed, adding: “It doesn’t make sense for councillors to be asked to make decisions without access to all the available information.”

At the January meeting, committee chair Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) admitted that, “in hindsight”, the full report should have been included in the papers after opposition councillors challenged its absence.

What the report says about the museum

The independent review made clear the museum is not in crisis but it is struggling to move forward. One of the biggest issues is money. The report said it is hard for the museum to win grants or sponsorship because it does not have solid information about its visitors.

Funders want to know who comes through the door, how often, and how numbers might grow in future. But at the moment the data is limited.

The report also says that the way the council currently counts costs makes it hard to see the true price of running the museum. It recommends sorting this out so future funding bids are more realistic and transparent.

Visitors may also recognise some of the other issues raised. Displays are described as dated, marketing as uninspiring, and the museum’s overall “identity” as unclear. Reviewers said the space could be made more interactive and appealing, especially for families and younger people.

The report praised the museum for already attracting a strong mix of ages, especially families. Its location inside Bourne Hall which also houses the library and community spaces was also seen as a major advantage. With better use of the building and stronger promotion, it could become more of a destination.

Volunteers are another key part of the picture. The report says there are some highly committed people helping out, but not enough of them. It suggests recruiting more volunteers from a wider range of backgrounds to better reflect the local community.

A council spokesperson said: “The Community and Wellbeing Committee has initiated the first step in a process to invest in the future of Bourne Hall Museum by submitting their preferred option, which was to spend up to £250,000 over two years, to the Strategy and Resources Committee for their consideration in March.

“Before committee, Community & Wellbeing Committee members saw a summary of the Culture Peer Challenge in the committee report and were invited to attend a briefing session which also summarised the findings of the report. The LGA Culture Peer Challenge for Bourne Hall Museum has been made available to all EEBC councillors and is also available on our website: [Culture Peer Challenge | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council](#).”

What happens next?

In short, the museum’s future now depends on whether councillors agree to invest. If funding is approved in March, work could begin on modernising the space and building a stronger long-term future. If not, things are likely to stay much as they are.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Related reports:

[Another Epsom and Ewell Borough Council cover-up of criticism?](#)

[A Decision Not Fully Bourne Out?](#)

[Ewell’s “UFO” shaped Bourne Hall to take off anew](#)

[Epsom Councillor claims he is being silenced for his transparency concerns](#)

[Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up](#)

[View of Bourne Hall and Museum, Spring Street, Ewell. \(Credit: Google Street View\)](#)



Surrey council budget published

10 February 2026



Surrey residents can expect to pay 4.99 per cent more council tax next year under plans in the new budget. Surrey County Council has revealed it is losing a huge chunk of government funding and has 'no choice' but to fill the gap locally.

Councillors are being asked to approve a 2.99 per cent council tax rise plus a 2 per cent adult social care levy from April 2026, the maximum allowed. For a typical Band D household, that means paying £7.67 more per month.

The increase comes after the Government announced a new three-year funding deal covering 2026-2029. While ministers say councils will get more money overall, most of the so-called "increase" relies on councils raising tax locally, not extra cash from Westminster.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said: "This is one of the most challenging financial periods we've faced.

"The removal of funding from the government means that within three years, 92 per cent of the local government budget in Surrey will have to come from Council Tax. Even putting Council Tax up by the maximum amount each year - as expected by government - will see no real increase in spending power for Surrey Councils. As costs rise with inflation and demand for services increases, there will be a local government funding black hole in Surrey without driving out further efficiencies.

"Our focus is to protect the services residents rely on: adult social care, children's services, support for communities, and the roads that keep Surrey moving, while continuing the strong financial discipline Surrey has shown in recent years and building a stable financial foundation for the new councils in April 2027."

For Surrey, the picture is stark. The council argues that even after maxing out council tax, the council's core spending power will rise by just 0.6 per cent next year and 1 per cent by 2028/29, effectively a cut once inflation is factored in.

The council's finance boss warned Surrey will lose more than £180m in government funding over the next three years. "There is nothing fair about this funding review for Surrey residents," they said. "Even with maximum council tax rises, we're still facing a funding gap of over £100m by 2028/29."

"The broken funding system we inherited has left local authorities across the country in crisis," the ministerial forward from the Funding Review 2.0 reads. "To turn this around, we need to reset local government so that it is fit, legal and decent and can, once again, reliably deliver for our communities. We are going to work with local authorities to rebuild throughout this parliament."

Why is funding being cut?

The changes stem from Fair Funding Reform, which reshuffles how government money is shared out. Areas with higher deprivation get more support, while wealthier areas lose out.

Since Surrey can raise more through council tax, the Government assumes it needs less help. This is despite soaring demand for services, especially children's services and adult social care.

What's in the budget?

The council's final-ever budget before it is abolished in 2027 totals £1.27bn - up just 1 per cent on last year. Officers warn finances are now more stretched than ever and tough decisions will continue.

To balance the books, the council plans:

- £50m in service cuts and efficiencies
- £42m in corporate savings
- Continued investment in:
 - SEND support (nearly £15m extra)
 - Adult social care (over 5 per cent increase)
 - Road repairs
 - New school places

- Children's homes

What happens next?

The Cabinet will decide what to recommend to the full council, including tax levels and spending plans. Despite the pressure, leaders insist the council remains financially stable, with £114m in reserves. But they admit the next few years will be tough and the new councils taking over in 2027 will inherit some hard choices.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Surrey County Council headquarters. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

Surrey consults on next year's budget

Surrey to sell off property in Epsom and elsewhere to fill budget gaps

A Surrey Council's finances don't add-up for 6th year running

10 February 2026



Spelthorne Borough Council's finances are still so muddled that they will not be fully fixed before it disappears into a new mega-council in West Surrey, says a new report. External auditors have once again refused to sign off the accounts, warning "time is not necessarily on the [council's] side".

Audit firm Grant Thornton told Spelthorne councillors at an Audit Committee meeting on January 22, that they cannot get enough evidence to say the numbers of the council's 2024/25 accounts are right. The auditors said they will issue another "disclaimer of opinion" on the council's 2024/25 accounts.

It is now the sixth year in a row Spelthorne has failed to get a clean audit. Meaning, the council cannot show all its balance sheets add up. This means the local authority does not know how much usable reserves it has or the true value of its assets.

The core problem is historic. For years the council's accounts were not properly audited, leaving big question marks over old balances, reserves and property values. As auditors cannot trust the starting figures, they cannot fully trust the current ones either.

Auditors said the lack of assurance will carry forward into next year and even into the new West Surrey unitary council when local government reorganisation happens.

Cllr Chris Bateson said: "And there's nothing we can do about that.?" To which, one auditor responded: "Time is not necessarily on your side." But she added, most of the councils in Surrey face the same challenging position of being sure of their accounts.

What does this mean for residents?

This is not a bankruptcy notice, the council has not run out of money. Residents' bins will still be collected and parks will be maintained. But this signals a long-running uncertainty about how solid the council's position really is.

For instance, this means big financial decisions are being made with an incomplete map and so increases the risk of mistakes. However, if finances are unclear, the council is monitored more closely by the financial watchdog and less likely to make major investment decisions

As Spelthorne is heading into a new unitary authority in 2027, these historic accounting issues will be transferred to the new council. The new West Surrey Council will have to deal with not just Spelthorne's accounts, but potentially five other ones.

Some progress but still serious problems

It was not all bad news. Auditors said Spelthorne's finance team has improved over the past year. Records are better organised, responses to questions are quicker, and the draft accounts were in better shape than before. So Grant Thornton could check more figures than last year.

One long-running mystery is a £17.6m gap between two key financial measures. The difference has been sitting in the accounts for years and still has not been fully explained, according to the report.

Auditors also found the council has been using the wrong method to set aside money to repay borrowing, something that affects long-term financial stability. A £9.9m property value increase was also put in the wrong set of accounts and now has to be reversed.

On top of that, there were dozens of technical mistakes and missing disclosures that auditors said should have been spotted internally before the accounts were sent over.

Bigger worries about value for money

In a separate verdict, auditors said they are not satisfied the council currently has strong enough arrangements to ensure it is spending money efficiently and sustainably.

Council officers said they have strengthened the finance team and are building more time into the process of preparing next year's accounts. But with reorganisation looming, the clean-up job now looks set to become the new council's problem too.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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

Related reports:

Need to sell Council property spelt out for Spelthorne

Spelthorne Borough Council commissioners

Who will be saddled with Spelthorne's and Woking's £3 billion debts?

Process matters – but so does the balance sheet

10 February 2026



Epsom & Ewell Times has recently published a run of stories raising concerns about process, openness and transparency at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC). Those issues matter. A council can deliver services and still fall short on how it explains itself, records decisions, shares information, and responds to scrutiny.

But if we are going to judge the borough fairly, we should also place EEBC in a wider Surrey context – particularly on the question that has become existential for parts of local government: financial resilience. In this respect we are all lucky not to be living in one of a number of other Surrey boroughs which carry massive debt.

A Surrey league table no council wants to top

Using each district and borough council's reported borrowing position and dividing by population, the county picture is stark. A small number of councils sit in an entirely different universe of debt-per-resident – Woking and Spelthorne above all, with Runnymede also far ahead of the pack.

At the other end, councils such as Reigate & Banstead report minimal borrowing compared to the Surrey outliers.

EEBC, on the same simple "borrowing per head" measure, is firmly in the low-debt group – nowhere near the high-risk profile that has dominated headlines elsewhere.

What this means for EEBC's story

It would be a mistake to pretend that "good finances" cancels out "poor process". It doesn't. Residents are entitled to proper explanations, accessible records, timely disclosure, and a culture that treats scrutiny as a civic asset rather than a nuisance.

But it would also be a mistake to ignore that, in Surrey terms, EEBC's financial position looks comparatively restrained – particularly when set against the scale of borrowing reported by the county's worst-affected councils.

That relative prudence matters because Surrey is heading toward local government reorganisation. When structures change, it is the underlying financial inheritance – and the habits that created it – that shape what services survive, what investments stall, and what risks get handed on.

The Residents' Association question

EEBC is unusual in one respect: it is dominated by Residents' Associations rather than the national parties. Some voters might reasonably assume that an administration not driven by national political goals would be **best-in-class** on the basics of local stewardship — especially finance.

Yet “not being party political” is not, by itself, a guarantee of excellence. A locally rooted administration can still fall into bad habits: weak challenge, insularity, a defensive attitude to information, or an over-reliance on officer-led process that leaves elected members appearing remote from key decisions.

If EEBC wants to claim the mantle of the “competent local alternative”, then the test is simple: keep the financial discipline — and raise the bar on transparency to match it.

Cllr Shanice Goldman's defection to the Conservative Party and her reasons contain some irony in this context. The super-debt league leaders of Surrey Districts' table of financial infamy are or were Conservative led during their plunges into debt despair.

A constructive conclusion

EEBC's comparatively modest borrowing position gives it something precious: room to manoeuvre. The council should use that room not to relax, but to improve how it governs: publish clearer narratives, make decision trails easier to follow, treat FOI and public questions as part of democratic health, and build trust through routine openness rather than reactive disclosure.

In other words: Surrey shows us what happens when the balance sheet breaks. EEBC should ensure that, locally, the democratic culture doesn't.



Related reports:

Another Epsom and Ewell Borough Council cover-up of criticism?

A Decision Not Fully Bourne Out?

Epsom Councillor claims he is being silenced for his transparency concerns

Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up

Goldman sacks the Epsom and Ewell Residents Association

Surrey districts “debt per head” league table

(£ per resident; higher = more debt per head)

1. **Woking** - ~£21,145 per head (total borrowing ~£2.180bn at 31 Mar 2025).
2. **Spelthorne** - ~£10,299 per head (long-term borrowing ~£1.042bn at 31 Mar 2025).
3. **Runnymede** - ~£6,553 per head (long-term borrowing ~£587.1m at 31 Mar 2025).
4. **Surrey Heath** - ~£2,029 per head (borrowing ~£183.4m at year end).
5. **Guildford** - ~£1,842 per head (borrowing shown as £74.040m short-term + £201.508m long-term at 31 Mar 2025).
6. **Mole Valley** - ~£1,192 per head (*see caveat*) (snippet-reported “external borrowing” ~£103m, referenced to its audited 2022/23 position).
7. **Tandridge** - ~£1,088 per head (*see caveat*) (figure inferred from the draft accounts extract available in search results; I was not able to open the full PDF again to verify the precise borrowing line-item).
8. **Epsom & Ewell** - ~£796 per head (borrowing ~£64.427m at 31 Mar 2025).
9. **Elmbridge** - ~£353 per head (*see caveat*) (accounts page was blocked to me; borrowing figure comes from the published accounts snippet indicating borrowing outstanding at 31 Mar 2025).
10. **Reigate & Banstead** - ~£33 per head (balance sheet shows **£5.0m short-term borrowing** and **no long-term borrowing** at 31 Mar 2025).

Caveat

Councils report “deficit” in several non-equivalent ways (e.g., accounting deficit on provision of services, general fund outturn variance, in-year overspend funded by reserves). EET had difficulty sourcing the figures for Waverley.

What to do with an old Town Hall - lessons for Epsom?

10 February 2026



Hundreds of thousands of pounds have been spent on consultants – yet Elmbridge Borough Council still does not know what to do with its offices, say opposition councillors.

They have now criticised the council claiming it has “little to show for it after years of delay”.

Changing ideas, multiple funding injections, fresh consultant commissions and repeated delays have left people uncertain about what will actually happen to the council’s headquarters and the wider town centre vision.

Around £402,000 has been paid to external consultants across four years as the local authority pursued what it described as a “flagship” regeneration project in Esher town centre. The scheme includes council offices, a library, car parking, a bowling club, tennis courts and temporary accommodation units.

But the council has accepted that earlier business cases are no longer valid due to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), which will see Surrey split into two mega unitary authorities. Under the plans, Elmbridge will be absorbed into East Surrey.

Two consultancy firms received payments, of around £200k each, linked to the Civic Centre project between 2022 and 2025, according to a Freedom Of Information (FOI) request:

Urban Vision

- 2022: £97,200
- 2023: £116,400

31ten Consulting Limited

- 2023: £28,587.60
- 2024: £143,886
- 2025: £16,200

These figures do not include a further £50,000 approved by Cabinet and Council in November and December 2025 for additional consultancy work. FOI officers confirmed that this allocation has not yet been spent.

Despite the scale of consultancy spending, the council confirmed it has not carried out any surveys, tests or marketing of the Civic Centre building as part of the scheme. In its FOI response, the authority said it does not hold any information on costs for such work “as no such surveys, tests or marketing have been undertaken”.

Cllr John Cope, Leader of the Conservatives and Opposition, Elmbridge Borough Council: “Spending over £400,000 of residents’ money on consultants, with little to show for it after years of delay, sums up how the Liberal Democrat-led council has operated in Elmbridge for the past eight years.

“This comes on top of millions wasted on a failed Local Plan that was rejected by the planning inspector, and £50,000 spent on a climate change citizens’ panel PR stunt that has delivered no clear benefit for local taxpayers.

“At a time when Elmbridge has one of the highest council tax bills in the country, residents are right to expect far better. The council should be cutting waste, especially at a time it is ending support for things that residents value, like Meals on Wheels and the local community centres. Their approach is wrong, and local Conservative councillors will continue to fight for residents’ interests.”

Before the government announced devolution in Surrey, the council had prepared a full 40-year business case. This work recommended entering into a joint venture with a developer to deliver housing on the Civic Centre site, while relocating council offices by purchasing an existing office building in Esher.

Consultancy firm 31ten was appointed in August 2023 to develop a detailed financial model setting out the implications of redevelopment over a 40-year lifespan.

But, as a result of LGR, the entire business case is now defunct, making it necessary to seek new advice on a potential

disposal of the site. Despite this, the council has said that redevelopment remains “integral” to Esher placemaking ambitions and could still “significantly enhance the vitality of the town centre”.

Cllr Simon Waugh, Leisure, Portfolio Holder for Culture & Commercial Strategy

“Our Esher vision, supported by local businesses and residents, as well as Councillors, sets out aspirations for Esher to be a vibrant town centre, providing residents and visitors with the opportunity to come together and take part in shared activities.

“At the December 2025 Elmbridge Council meeting it was agreed that limited funding was needed for a property consultant to assess the Civic Centre site for housing development within the context of the Esher vision.”

Portfolio holder said the civic centre is “no longer suitable as a modern workplace” as it is costly to maintain and environmentally unsustainable. He said Elmbridge council has continued to review options to ensure value for money, act in the best interest of residents and deliver a smooth as well as effective transition to the new unitary authority.

The council has cited several reasons for continuing work on the site, including government housing targets requiring councils to help deliver 1.5m new homes nationally.

Cllr Waugh said: “The demand for new homes remains strong across the country, including in Elmbridge. The government continues to set ambitious targets to address the housing crisis and Elmbridge Borough Council is firmly committed to supporting the delivery of housing within the borough.

“The Civic Centre site presents this Council with an opportunity to provide extra homes in Esher and to deliver on improved connectivity to the town - providing a community meeting point for markets and events currently lacking in the town. For residents and businesses, we foresee economic benefits for the high street, and improved connectivity around Esher town centre, as well as much needed housing. We will bring an update to Elmbridge Cabinet and Council in the coming months.”

The council is now seeking fresh advice on disposal options, even as responsibility for the site is expected to transfer to the new East Surrey authority by April 2027.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Elmbridge Civic Centre, where Elmbridge Borough Council is based. Photo credit Emily Coady-Stemp, LDR.

Related reports:

The Epsom and Ewell Town Hall plan

A new Town Hall for Epsom and Ewell?

Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up

10 February 2026



BBC LDRS reports: A Surrey council [Epsom and Ewell] must pay out up to £500,000 after failing to properly check the condition of a major leisure centre before handing it over to a new operator. Poor ventilation, damp and ‘possible roof cracks’ were cited as some of the problems related to the “fabric” of the building.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has agreed to cover the costs of urgent repairs at Rainbow Leisure Centre after the new contractors took over the site and uncovered a long list of issues, some relating to the structure and fabric of the building. Places Leisure took over the contract on October 1, 2025, but has not yet signed on the dotted line, the LDRS understands.

The pay out was approved via a confidential urgent decision, seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), after Places Leisure said it should not be responsible for fixing the issues.

An urgent decision is when a council cannot wait until the usual decision-making committee process as it could harm the public or council interests.

Some of the problems relate to the fabric of the building, for which the council is responsible, the LDRS understands. This is despite the council previously insisting it had carried out such checks.

In a public report dated June 2025, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council said it had commissioned a stock condition report

to make sure the building was handed over in good nick.

As the LDRS understands, council officers believed the centre would be handed back in good condition. An external consultant was used, but their inspection was not invasive, meaning hidden problems may not have been picked up. But just six months later, the authority is now facing a bill of up to £500k to fix problems that either were missed or not properly dealt with because the council did not know about them.

When Places took over, it found issues it believed the previous operator should have fixed. Some of the problems raised include:

- Fire alarm faults
- Lift issues
- Broken seating
- Damaged glazing
- Faulty toilets
- Poor ventilation
- Damp
- Possible roof cracks
- Machinery at “end of life”

Some were flagged as health and safety risks, meaning urgent action was needed to keep the centre safe and open.

The council has now agreed to let Places carry out the repairs and reclaim the costs by reducing the management fee it pays back to the council. Officers said this is the “most cost-effective” option, but it effectively means residents are picking up the tab.

Why is the council paying?

Under the contract, some repairs fall to the council as landlord responsibilities. Others may be recoverable from former operator GLL, but legal experts warn the council is unlikely to claw back the full amount. GLL has been contacted for comment. [See below for additional reporting.]

The authority plans to dip into its ‘dilapidation’ reserve, a pot of money set aside for building repairs, to cover the shortfall. Officers admit the final cost is still being worked out, but estimate it could reach up to £500,000.

Opposition fury

Councillors have slammed the council for not knowing the state of its own properties.

Cllr **Alex Coley**, member of the Independent group (Ruxley), said: “I’d have hoped that the council as landlord would understand the condition of the leisure centre to establish its potential liability.”

Labour group leader, Cllr **Kate Chinn**, (Court) hit out at the ruling Residents’ Association (RA), calling the situation a “shocking scandal”.

She said: “This secrecy wasn’t about keeping the costs involved from the parties to the negotiations as they already know them. It was about preventing the public from learning how incompetent the RA are.”

She added: “Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) has rightly owned this fiasco, but without realising that his ‘nothing to see’ attitude that council tax payers should expect to be routinely stuck with bills on this scale shows how complacent he is with their money.”

She accused the ruling group of being distracted: “The RA have clearly taken their eye off the ball as they focus on a self-serving attempt to create new parish councils and new roles for themselves.”

Cllr **James Lawrence**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group (College), said the situation shows “the importance of maintaining key properties so they are in good working condition and ensuring the status of our properties is communicated to both councillors and residents in good time.”

Council response

Council leaders defended the decision, saying negotiations are normal during handovers. Councillors Neil Dallen and **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said: “Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred to a new operator, Places Leisure, on 1 October 2025. Since then, we’ve been pleased to see a number of improvements at the centre.

“This marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the leisure centre... including significant investment to upgrade the gym, studios, swimming changing rooms and more, which are already underway.”

They added: “With any handover, it is normal practice for there to be negotiations around works to be carried out which form part of the contract finalisation.”

However, they refused to release further information, saying: “Details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain.”

Places Leisure

A spokesperson said: “Places Leisure took over the operation and management of Rainbow Leisure Centre in partnership with Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 1st October 2025. We are excited to work closely with the Council to implement changes and significant investment at the centre to make a positive impact for the local community.”

Emily Dalton LDRS - the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service

Additional reporting from Epsom and Ewell Times:

In a further twist GLL has supplied Epsom and Ewell Times a response to the issues: *“GLL was proud to partner with Epsom and Ewell Council on the design and opening of Rainbow Leisure Centre over 20 years ago. This innovative and award-winning centre has been extremely successful over the 20 years of GLL’s tenure, engaging millions of local residents in activity, improving their health and wellbeing.*

“GLL is unaware of any legal claim that the Council is looking to bring in relation to the standard of the building on handover, especially as there are set protocols to deal with building handovers prior to any instigation of legal action. As background, the Council undertook, via specialist contractors, a full survey of the building prior to GLL exiting. As is normal in all leisure transfers, items that were identified for [repair or rectification] in that survey for GLL were all completed prior to handover and signed off by the specialist contractors on behalf of the Council. GLL handed the building over to the standard required by the Council and under the contract.”

It is normal practice for Councils as landlords to have rights of periodic entry and inspection of premises it engages contractors to manage. Either the Council was negligent in failing to insert such rights in the contract with GLL or the Council has been negligent over an extended period of years in failing to carry out inspections or to carry out inspections properly.

The Council has made fully public announcements that Places commenced its contract on 1st October 2025. See Epsom and Ewell Times report: Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators. The Information Commissioner has made plain that Council’s cannot evade accountability by claims of ongoing contractual negotiations. The tender process having ended for both GLL and Places means there is little if any financially sensitive information to protect justifying a confidential label on information that exposes probable Council incompetence.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked Epsom and Ewell Borough Council a series of questions about these issues and received the same “nothing to see here” response from Cllr Dallen as obtained by the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) reporter Emily Dalton, as above. The Epsom and Ewell Times has thus submitted to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council formal Freedom of Information Act demands for relevant information.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Related reports:

[Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators](#)

[Gold star at the end of the Rainbow](#)

[Pot of gold for Rainbow?](#)

Surrey to sell off property in Epsom and elsewhere to fill budget gaps

10 February 2026



Surrey County Council is looking to bank a major cash boost by selling off a string of properties sitting idle across the county. The money is earmarked to help plug budget pressures and support future investment in council services.

Cabinet members gave officers the green light to pursue the sale of six unused council sites at a meeting on November 25. Cabinet papers show the deals are expected to generate significant capital receipts, while saving taxpayers thousands more in ongoing security and maintenance costs. The detailed sale values were kept behind closed doors in restricted documents due to commercial sensitivity.

The properties, spread across Staines, Ewell, Tongham, Wallington, and Mickleham, include former social care and nursery buildings, vacant houses, and small plots of land. The sales follow open marketing campaigns and recommended offers from prospective buyers.

Properties up for sale include:

- 33 Rookery Road, Staines: Former supported living houses, now demolished, being marketed for residential redevelopment.
- Former Fairways Day Centre, Staines: A large, partially vacant building in a flood zone that the council said would be costly to maintain.
- **Beechcroft Nursery, Ewell:** An empty house and three acres of scrubland, with 11 bids received from developers.
- Land west of Oxenden Court, Tongham: Small 0.03-hectare plot with access and contamination issues.
- 42 Little Woodcote Estate, Wallington: 3-bed house previously leased to Halsey Garton Residential Ltd, now vacant. Sale includes surrender of the lease.
- 2 Pressforward Cottages, Mickleham: Terraced 3-bed house with a leasehold to be surrendered before sale.

Together the properties have been vacant and unused for months, in some cases years, leaving the council to pick up costs for business rates, insurance and preventing vandalism. By selling them, the authority says it will cut those losses and funnel the money into frontline priorities: ensuring the stable provision of services for Surrey county council and the future unitary authorities.

Officials stress that legal checks, including anti-money-laundering safeguards, will be completed before any contracts are signed. Cabinet is also being asked to give senior directors delegated authority to finalise the deals swiftly, avoiding developer drop-out and market risk.

Decisions on the disposals will be made at upcoming Cabinet meetings, with the detailed sale values kept behind closed doors for now due to commercial sensitivity.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Image: Beechcroft Nursery Reigate Road Ewell Epsom - Google maps