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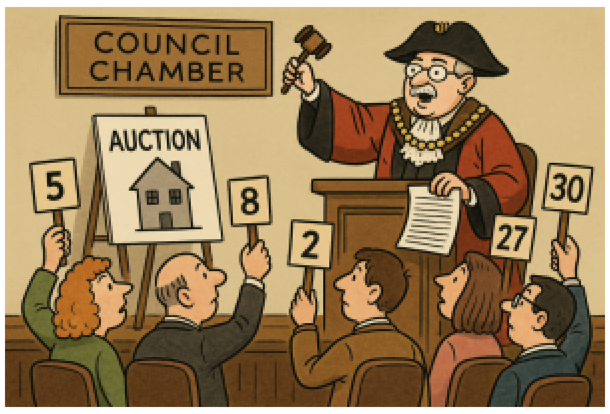
Surrey Heath steps up sell-off drive as council debts mount

20 September 2025



Surrey Heath Borough Council is accelerating the disposal of local assets to reduce its debts, with both car parks and town centre shops now on the block.

At its September executive meeting councillors agreed to sell part of Yorktown car park in Sullivan Road, Camberley. Seventy-three of its 137 bays will go, leaving 64, after officials reported average daily use of only 43 vehicles. The site generates just £9,000 a year – £1.26 per bay per week – and is earmarked for housing in the borough's local plan. The sale is expected to provide "much-needed capital" before year end.

The same meeting also approved the disposal of a two-storey retail block in Obelisk Way. Despite being fully let to three shops and producing a gross rental income of £45,000, once landlord costs and service charges were taken into account the site posted a net loss of £4,500 last year. Substantial repairs were also looming. Councillors decided the 15,564 sq ft property, which includes eight parking spaces, would be "more valuable sold than retained" and could be converted for mixed residential use.

The council must cut £1.74m from its budget this year and £3.14m overall, alongside reducing interest payments on external debt and making a further £500,000 from service reviews. Cllr Kel Finan-Cooke, portfolio holder for property and economic development, said the financial case for both sales was "compelling". Conservative deputy leader Cllr Jonny Cope called the Obelisk Way disposal "sensible".

The sales place Surrey Heath in a wider national picture of local authorities struggling to balance their books. Years of shrinking central government funding, soaring social care costs and inflationary pressures have driven several councils close to collapse. Woking, Birmingham, Thurrock and Croydon have all issued effective bankruptcy notices in recent years, with asset sales and service cuts becoming the default response.

Critics warn that one-off disposals risk stripping town centres of public assets for good, but supporters argue such sales are unavoidable if councils are to stave off financial failure and protect statutory services. For Surrey Heath, further reviews of underperforming sites are expected as the borough seeks to navigate its way through England's growing local government funding crisis.

Sam Jones – Reporter

Surrey Police tax set to rise

20 September 2025

Council tax bills could keep climbing despite warnings residents could be getting less bang for their buck. Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner has insisted she "will not ask the public to be less safe" as she defended plans to raise council tax for policing.

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At a Police and Crime Panel meeting last week (September 4), PCC Lisa Townsend explained the decisions on the annual precept rise were driven by the Chief Constable's assessment of what the force needs to keep the country safe.

"It's not me plucking a figure out of thin air," she told councillors. For Ms Townsend, the choice is clear: "Surrey Police are cutting their cloth, but what I am not prepared to do is ask the public to be less safe."

Surrey Police must find £14.8m savings by 2029 with pay (which makes up 80 per cent of its spending) ramping up costs, a report states. Each 1 per cent pay rise for police officers adds £2.4m to the budget, equivalent to £4.80 on the average council tax bill.

The report revealed: "Whilst the force is making every effort to not impact services as a result of savings required, there is a risk that this will not be possible".

Ms Townsend's comments came after councillors questioned whether constant tax rises could be justified when Surrey Police must still deliver sweeping budget cuts to balance its budget.

Cllr Richard Wilson challenged: "At some point Surrey Police has to cut its cloth. You can't keep asking the public for more and more money when it's a regressive tax." He asked the PCC to "give the public a break" from the ever-increasing tax bills.

But finance officers warned that the ability to make further cuts "become more difficult every year" despite efforts to standardise IT systems, renegotiate contracts and improve procurement. They warned if Surrey Police do not increase the precept in a particular year then it has "missed that chance" in every following year to raise funds for the Force.

Although the Government has promised to fund some police pay rises above 2.8 per cent, Surrey is still waiting for clarity on how much of this money it will actually receive. The long-awaited Police Reform Bill could also see some functions stripped away to a national body or Surrey forced into merger talks — changes with potentially "major financial implications."

Surrey remains one of the lowest government-funded forces in the country, leaving residents to shoulder more of the burden through local taxation.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council debt update

20 September 2025

Councils across the UK have added a further £7.8bn to their collective borrowing in the last year, leaving local authorities with debts of £122.2bn – the equivalent of £1,791 for every resident. The figures, released by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government show that council debt rose seven per cent in a single year from £114.5bn in 2024.

For Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC), debt at the end of the 2024/25 financial year stood at £64.4m – or £785.80 per head of population. Surrey County Council's position is much larger in absolute terms, with borrowing of £1.07bn, equating to £873.69 per resident. EEBC's debt level is exactly the same as the previous year. "This is because the council has not taken on any additional borrowing, and no debt was paid between the two financial years", said Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town Ward), Chair of EEBC's Strategy and Resources Committee.

Both figures sit below the UK-wide average of £1,791 per head but illustrate how deeply embedded borrowing now is in local government finance.

Why councils borrow

Local authorities are permitted to borrow to fund projects such as schools, leisure centres, theatres and housing. Many also borrowed heavily over the past decade to acquire commercial property – from office parks to shopping centres – intended to generate rental income to offset cuts to central government funding.

But short-term borrowing from central government has almost tripled in recent years, in some cases used to plug day-to-day budget gaps rather than pay for long-term investments. Jonathan Carr-West of the Local Government Information Unit warned the approach was "extremely worrying", likening it to "payday loans for local governments".

Surrey's position

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said that while the council had "a stable budget position", it was not immune to national financial pressures. He added: "All our key services – including social care, children's services, and highways maintenance – are facing higher demand, higher costs, and reduced funding. We must find ways to continue to support those residents who need us most, and to deliver the services that people rely on every day.

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"As part of our budget setting process, the levels of balances and reserves have been determined to ensure that the level is justifiable and manageable in the context of local circumstances and risk."

Surrey's capital spending ambitions include new school places, highways upgrades, green initiatives, social care accommodation and library improvements, but the council has been forced to hold more expensive short-term debt while waiting for interest rates to fall.

National concerns

Warnings about the sustainability of council borrowing are not new. Six authorities – Croydon, Slough, Thurrock, Birmingham, Woking and Nottingham – have effectively declared bankruptcy in recent years, in some cases due to failed investment schemes. Thurrock alone faces a £469m funding black hole from collapsed solar farm projects.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has calculated that local authority "core spending power" remains 18% lower per resident than in 2010 despite some increases since the pandemic.

In June, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer pledged an overhaul of the council grant system to simplify the funding formula and shift resources towards the most deprived areas. While welcomed by urban councils, rural authorities have raised concerns that redistribution could "overcompensate" and leave them exposed.

Cost of servicing debt

Separate analysis by the *Times* found that councils across Great Britain now spend the equivalent of a fifth of council tax revenues on servicing their debts. Annual interest costs are estimated at over £4bn – more than the combined national spend on emergency housing and libraries, culture and tourism.

The Local Government Association's finance spokesperson, Cllr Pete Marland, said council finances "remain in a fragile position", adding: "A sustainable, long-term financial model for local government must lead to all councils having adequate resources to meet growing cost and demand pressures."

The local picture

Epsom and Ewell's £64.4m debt may appear modest compared with Surrey County Council's £1.07bn, but both authorities – like councils nationwide – must balance their budgets each year while contending with higher borrowing costs, reduced grant funding and rising demand for services.

With 30 more councils seeking exceptional financial support from government this year, including permission to use loans or asset sales to cover day-to-day spending, the pressure on local finances is set to remain intense.

The table below lists all of Surrey's districts highest debt first for 2024/2025:

Surrey's Districts	Total debt	Per person
Woking	£2,155,641,000	£20,601.33
Spelthorne	£1,065,761,000	£10,252.24
Runnymede	£597,712,000	£6,608.79
Guildford	£311,532,000	£2,088.35
Surrey Heath	£183,436,000	£1,990.24
Waverley	£140,286,000	£1,061.60
Tandridge	£92,816,000	£1,038.11
Mole Valley	£73,850,000	£836.68
Epsom & Ewell	£64,427,000	£785.80
Elmbridge	£48,624,000	£346.08
Reigate & Banstead	£5,000,000	£32.05

Guildford Council's CEO's salary touches the UK Prime Minister's

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Guildford and Waverley Borough Council's chief executive's new salary will be £169,950 after a three per cent pay rise was agreed – despite the likelihood the two councils will soon be dissolved as part of local government reorganisation.

[The annual salary for a UK Prime Minister is £172,153, which includes £80,807 for the role of Prime Minister and an additional £91,346 for being an MP.]

Pedro Wrobel was appointed as the new joint chief executive in 2024, having previously been Westminster City Council's executive director for innovation and change. He replaced former boss Tom Horwood, who said he was standing down from the then £150,000 job due to health concerns.

Other options that had been on the table at the Thursday, July 31 Guildford and Waverley Joint Senior Staff Committee included a 3.2 per cent bump, welcomed by the Union for Local Authorities CEO's and Senior Managers, as well as a bumper one-off £25,500 lump sum that would have ramped the position's salary up to £185,000. The council said this would have brought the role in line with similar shared CEO roles such as Broadland District and South Norfolk, as well as Boston Borough, East Lindsey District, and South Holland District.

In the end, the committee took all of two minutes to agree on a three per cent rise — the equivalent of an extra £4,950 a year. The union UNISON has already agreed a three per cent award for Waverley Borough Council employees. No agreement for Guildford Borough Council employees has been agreed.

A spokesperson for Waverley Borough Council said: "This decision aligns with the pay award agreed with UNISON for Waverley Borough Council employees, and the councils' Joint Leadership Team. Maintaining a competitive remuneration package is essential to attract and retain high-calibre leadership. The benchmarking data shows that many councils with similar or even smaller populations and fewer employees offer higher salaries. A modest increase helps to ensure the council remains competitive in a challenging recruitment market."

Mr Wrobel's new salary is among the highest received by council bosses in the Southeast and Surrey – although on a per head of population basis it is the lowest among similar councils with a joint role. This, the council argues, reflects the significant scale and complexity of the Guildford and Waverley job – with a combined population of more than 270,000 and responsibility for a workforce of more than 1,100 employees and 100 borough councillors.

The councils rejected the 3.2 per cent offer as it would have created inconsistency with the rest of the leadership team. While the one-off uplift to £185,000 would have represented a 12 per cent increase, significantly above local and national pay trends, it was therefore considered inappropriate and difficult to justify financially at this time.

Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

Chief Executive Salaries – Surrey Councils

Figures are the most recently published base salaries or salary bands. Some councils report ranges, others exact figures, and a few include allowances or car benefits.

Council	Chief Executive Salary (approx)
Surrey County Council	£234,600 (former CEO)
Guildford & Waverley	£169,950
Epsom & Ewell	£131,000 – £152,000 + 4% allowance
Mole Valley	£122,000 – £136,000
Elmbridge	Up to £140,000+ (approval required)
Reigate & Banstead	£137,500 – £144,500
Runnymede	£100,000+ (not specified)
Spelthorne	Up to £131,000
Surrey Heath	£136,800 + £2,000 car allowance
Tandridge	£122,000 – £138,000 (grade range)
Woking	Not disclosed

New CEO Pedro Wrobel (image GBC) and UK PM Starmer

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A Surrey Council debates its bank's "support" for Gaza genocide

20 September 2025

Pro-Palestinian campaigners have urged a Surrey council to cut financial ties with Barclays Bank, accusing the firm, of funding what they called Israel's "genocide of the Palestinian people". But no formal decision on divestment was made at the meeting.

Simon Higgins, on behalf of West Surrey Palestine Solidarity Campaign, delivered a statement to Guildford Borough Council on July 30, calling for the authority to take an "ethical and moral stand" by divesting from Barclays.

He claimed research shows Barclays holds billions in shares and loans to arms companies whose weapons are being used in Israel in attacks on Palestinians.

"If Guildford Borough Council keeps investing in Barclays, it's helping fund this genocide," Mr Higgins said. "This cannot continue." He added the bank helps the Israeli government raise money by acting as a dealer for its bonds.

Mr Higgins said: "Data obtained by independent research organisation, Profundo has revealed that

- Barclays holds over £2 billion in shares and provides £6.1 billion in loans and underwriting to nine companies whose weapons are being used by Israel in its genocidal attacks on the Palestinian people.
- Investment and financial services to these arms companies facilitates the provision of weapons for Israel's attacks.
- Barclays acts as a 'primary dealer' for Israel's government bonds, enabling it to raise money to fund its genocidal policies. By investing in Barclays, GBC is aiding this genocide."
- He said over 700 local people have signed a petition calling for the council to divest, adding both the Mayor of Guildford and the council's finance lead have acknowledged the seriousness of the situation.

Responding to the claims, Cllr Richard Lucas, lead for finance and property said he shared Mr Higgins' horror at what is happening in Gaza, but did not believe the case against Barclays was clear-cut.

Cllr Lucas said: "[Guildford council] share Mr Higgins' revulsion of what is going on but we don't think he has made a clear case against Barclays and furthermore we are not in a position to make a detailed judgment on this.

"We're already moving away from Barclays as part of our wider investment strategy," he added. "We understand the concerns, but we have to make decisions responsibly."

He said the research quoted by Higgins contradicts Barclays' own statements, which say the bank doesn't use its own money to invest in arms companies and that it pulled out of Israeli government bond deals last summer.

Cllr Lucas also explained how the council's investment policy works. "We follow national guidelines that tell us to prioritise security and liquidity, and to act as responsible investors," he said.

The council currently has two investments with Barclays – £3 million in a 95-day notice account (which is already being withdrawn), and £1.5 million in bonds that mature in 2027. Lucas said pulling out of the latter early would result in a significant financial loss.

"We're already moving away from Barclays as part of our wider investment strategy," he added. "We understand the concerns, but we have to make decisions responsibly."

Speaking afterwards, Mr Higgins said: "At the meeting I was shut down and denied a right of reply. This is unfair, undemocratic and unconstitutional."

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Mole Valley spending plans

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How £11m for rail, transport, school, health and recreation upgrades will be spent in Mole Valley has been laid out. The district council has approved spending plans for community infrastructure money collected from developers since 2016 – with almost half expected to go on cycling and walking schemes. Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is paid as part of the planning process to help offset the impact of the growing number of homes in the borough. Councillor Bradley Nelson, cabinet member for planning, said: "The local plan was adopted in 2024 so the time has come to focus on the £11m of strategic CIL which could rise to £34m given the local plan growth." He said the projects should be ones "the council thinks are necessary and achievable to help support development growth."

"The programme commits investment for vital infrastructure such as health provision in Ashtead, Bookham, and a health hub in Leatherhead. Early years provision in Ashtead and Dorking would be targeted for funding as well as train station improvements in Dorking which we hope will lead to wider improvements and help the district as a whole, as well as investment in the district parks." The council has been working with Surrey County Council over transport, education, early years provision and flood defence, Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care Partnership, Great Western Railway, Network Rail, the Football Foundation, and its own parks and open spaces team to get an up-to-date picture of the suitable projects.

It has earmarked two transport projects to upgrade rail infrastructure on the North Downs Line at the stations in Dorking. These projects, the Tuesday July 22 cabinet papers read, will complement planned improvements on the line, such as battery-electric trains, and increase the number of people using this sustainable transport mode. Deepdene Station will be upgraded as a priority and a lift installed, acting as a major contribution towards "realising the potential of the district's east-west travel connections, supporting growth and promoting sustainable development". School capacity issues requiring funding in Hookwood could also be addressed, as well as the expansion of the SEND school on Woodland in Leatherhead.

Surrey County Council's early years team has identified two potential projects, one in Ashtead and one in Dorking, while football pitches at Ashcombe Secondary School in Dorking and the other at the Brockham Big Field could be upgraded to modern standards. There would also be financial support for the resurfacing of the sand-dressed pitch at Therfield Secondary School in Leatherhead to allow the installation of a new 3G football pitch "without losing a vital resource for hockey."

Cllr Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (Liberal Democrats: Leatherhead North) said: "We all know just how much residents are concerned about the amount of development that comes and their biggest concern is where does the infrastructure come. It often seems that it's a bit of a chicken and egg because the CIL comes from development, and without development you don't get CIL – and therefore you don't get infrastructure. For a long time we've been in the position where we've been telling residents we have to build these homes and we have to build these sites – and there hasn't been anything to show – so it is really welcome to say 'this is how we meet the infrastructure demands'. She added: "We can provide the funding, but we are dependent on the railway companies, the GP surgeries, the schools, to make those bids and to ask for the funding. But the development will pay for it and hopefully they will all come together at the same time."

Estimated CIL Contributions by Infrastructure Category

- **Transport – Active Travel** – £11,555,000
- **Transport – Passenger Transport** – £3,450,000
- **Well Being – Health – Primary Care** – £2,350,000
- **Well Being – Open Space and Public Realm** – £3,859,000
- **Well Being – Sports Facilities** – £771,000
- **Education – SEND** – £870,000
- **Education – Early Years** – £300,000
- **Flood Defence – Nature Flood Management** – £95,000

Surrey County Council claim funding review "unfair".

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A Surrey County Council could be pushed to the brink of financial crisis if government reforms, aimed at evening out local authority funding, go ahead, its leader has warned. Cllr **Tim Oliver** (Conservative) said Surrey County Council could be heading towards a "cliff edge" under proposals which could dramatically reduce Surrey's income. The central government is looking at scrapping the current council tax funding model in favour of a national 100 per cent 'equaliser' system where each local authority gets the same amount of funding. The Conservative leader's warning came during a cabinet meeting on July 22, where he suggested the government's 'Fair Funding Review' would hit Surrey harder than most councils due to its higher council tax base.

The central government has launched a review into how local councils are funded across the country, called the fair funding review. Reports suggest the government could go ahead with a 100 per cent "equaliser" for local government income, meaning every council essentially gets the same level of council tax income. "There will be at some point a cliff edge for this council," the Conservative leader warned colleagues. "There is an expectation we will look to our residents to fill that gap. That gap won't be filled – can't be filled – even if we were to increase council tax by 5 per cent." Currently, Surrey has a high council tax base meaning it has more band H houses, paying at least £3,692.70 in 2025, compared to other parts of the country.

The funding reforms under consideration could flatten out this advantage by reallocating resources away from wealthier counties like Surrey and towards lower-income authorities. Cllr Oliver warned the resulting drop in funding would not be completely offset by any increase in local council tax, leaving the council with a growing deficit and fewer levers to pull. "It's absolutely essential that we drive efficiencies wherever possible," he said. "Otherwise this council like many others I'm afraid will be in section 114 territory where we simply cannot have a balanced budget." A Section 114 notice effectively means the council's expenditure outweighs its income. As councils cannot go 'bankrupt' it stops the authority from spending any more money except from its legal responsibilities.

Despite the stark and solemn warnings, Cllr Oliver said the council was committed to avoiding that outcome and praised the authority's efforts over the past six years to manage finances. He said: "Whether that's lobbying the government or managing our budget locally […] to make sure we can continue to provide services to our residents but that is going to be challenging."

But government ministers would argue the current local government system is "broken" and outdated, with council tax bands still based on 1991 property values. A statement from the secretaries of state on the Fair Funding Review said: "Our reforms will take into account the different needs and costs faced by communities across the country, including adjusting for the costs of remoteness faced by rural communities, and the ability of individual local authorities to raise Council Tax, while also resetting business rates income. It will update the crucial formulae used to calculate funding allocations, which are a decade out of date."

Related reports:

Two unitaries will save money says Surrey leader

Surrey leaders review spending review

Surrey's BIG debt question in local government reorganisation

Tim Oliver Surrey County Council leader – Surrey Live

Epsom and Ewell Council Tax Arrears Top £1.8 Million

20 September 2025

Council tax arrears in Epsom and Ewell have reached £1.8 million, according to new figures from the Department for

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Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The amount contributes to a record £6.6 billion of outstanding council tax across England, highlighting a deepening crisis in household finances.

The local figure reflects the ongoing pressures of the cost-of-living crisis, with many households struggling to pay essential bills. National Debtline, the free debt advice service run by the Money Advice Trust, reports that one in four people contacting them for help has council tax debt, with an average shortfall of £1,958 per person.

Research from the Money Advice Trust found that, as of March 2025, around 2.2 million people in England — equivalent to 5% of households — were behind on their council tax.

Council tax is a critical source of revenue for local authorities, funding services including social care, waste collection, and local infrastructure. But with budgets increasingly stretched, councils have relied more on council tax income, pushing bills higher and making payment harder for some residents.

Currently, rules mean that if a resident misses a single council tax payment, they can become liable for the full annual amount, which can quickly escalate to court action and bailiff involvement.

In response, the Government has proposed extending the timeframe before enforcement action begins, giving people more opportunity to catch up on missed payments. The Ministry of Justice has also announced a consultation on strengthening oversight of the bailiff industry, with proposals to give the Enforcement Conduct Board statutory powers to regulate bailiff practices.

Steve Vaid, Chief Executive of the Money Advice Trust, said:

“Unless changes are made at a policy level, arrears are likely to keep climbing. At National Debtline, we’re calling for improved collection practices, as well as greater investment in council tax support schemes, to prevent people falling behind in the first place.”

National Debtline encourages any resident worried about their council tax payments to seek free, independent advice before their debts spiral. Their helpline is available on **0808 808 4000** or via **www.nationaldebtline.org**.

Surrey leaders review spending review

20 September 2025

Government Spending Review Falls Short for Surrey Councils and Epsom Hospital, Say Local Leaders

The UK Government’s latest Spending Review has drawn a mixed reaction from Surrey leaders, with concerns mounting over local council finances and delays to urgently needed hospital upgrades in the Epsom area.

Surrey County Council: Welcome Commitments, Ongoing Pressures

Responding to the Chancellor’s announcements, Surrey County Council Leader Cllr Tim Oliver acknowledged “important announcements,” including increases in core funding for local government, funding pledges for children’s services, and a renewed commitment to reforming Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision.

However, Cllr Oliver warned that the headline increase in “core spending power” rests on councils raising council tax by the full 5%—a move that may place strain on households during a cost-of-living crisis. Even with that assumption, county and unitary authorities across England are projected to face a £2.2 billion funding gap next year.

“Whilst our finances have been transformed to a point where we have delivered stable, balanced budgets year after year,” Oliver said, “we are not exempt from the financial challenges faced by councils.”

Oliver stressed the urgency of the upcoming *Fair Funding Review*, calling for a “fair and proportionate” outcome to ensure long-term stability for local authorities like Surrey.

Locally, the council has invested an additional £15 million into a three-year SEND recovery plan, begun in September 2023, which is reportedly beginning to bear fruit. But Oliver added that the government’s announcements stop short of tackling deeper issues. “Provision and support for children with SEND is a systemic issue… and the current system does not work for families, schools or councils,” he said.

SEND Deficits and Budget Certainty

Perhaps the sharpest criticism came over the government’s silence on the spiralling SEND deficits many councils face. Without intervention, these deficits—currently kept off balance sheet—will be formally accounted for from next April.

“Many local authorities, including Surrey, are facing a continuing increase in demand in comparison with levels of funding received,” Oliver said. “Councils will soon start planning their budgets for next year and cannot afford to have this can

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kicked down the road any longer."

Future of Local Government in Surrey

The Spending Review did include a continued commitment to *Local Government Reorganisation* (LGR)—a development welcomed by Surrey County Council. Surrey recently submitted a proposal to transition to two unitary authorities, a move that could reshape local government in the county.

"We have worked hard to form that proposal," said Oliver, "to deliver the best possible outcome for Surrey residents."

Local MPs Condemn "Missed Opportunity" for Epsom & St Helier Hospitals

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrat MPs for Epsom & Ewell, Carshalton & Wallington, and Sutton & Cheam expressed deep disappointment over the absence of additional investment in the long-delayed redevelopment of Epsom & St Helier Hospitals.

Despite a known £150 million repair backlog, the government has only committed £12 million to date, with the timeline for a new specialist emergency hospital now postponed until 2033 under the Labour government. Local MPs Bobby Dean, Helen Maguire, and Luke Taylor said this continued delay threatens the "very future of our hospitals."

"The Government has missed a massive opportunity to deliver real change for Epsom & St Helier Hospitals," they said in a joint statement. "£12 million is simply a drop in the ocean."

The trio highlighted years of cross-party pressure in Westminster, including Prime Minister's Questions and debates, aimed at securing vital upgrades for the "crumbling" estate. "After 14 years of broken promises, the Government has an opportunity to do better," they added.

Rising Council Tax on the Horizon

Further national analysis has added to concerns around the financial implications of the Spending Review for local authorities. Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), noted that while English local government fared "perhaps a little bit better than it might have expected," there is a "sting in the tail": council tax bills are now set to rise at their fastest rate of any parliament since 2001–2005.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves confirmed that councils' *core spending power* will rise by 2.6% annually from next year. However, this figure is based on the assumption that councils will impose the full 5% annual increase in council tax—an option many local authorities may feel compelled to take. "We won't be going above that," Reeves said. "That is the council tax policy that we inherited from the previous Government, and that we will be continuing."

Liberal Democrat deputy leader Daisy Cooper described the overall package as a "missed opportunity," warning that council budgets—especially in areas such as social care—remain "very, very stretched." She added: "The Government is now looking to local councils to put up council tax to plug the gap in these particular areas… We cannot wait. This can't be kicked down the road any longer. The Government has got to act now."

For residents of Epsom and Ewell, the message is clear: whether through delays to vital infrastructure or increasing local taxation, the burden of national decisions may be felt most acutely at the community level.

Another Surrey borough heading for bankruptcy?

20 September 2025

Surrey Heath Borough Council's desperation to fight off bankruptcy crystallised further after it agreed to sell a car park and land in order "to keep the lights on". The council has to make huge cuts this year to balance its budget after long-delayed audits revealed millions of pounds was missing from its balance sheet. This included more than £8m wiped off its reserves effectively overnight and the downgrading in value of its major assets bought as part of a £100m regeneration project.

On Tuesday, May 21, the council agreed to sell Woodend Road car park in Deepcut and land on London Road in Camberley to begin to claw back desperately needed cash. Failure to balance its books would result in the loss of support given to the community through things such as meals on wheels type services, funding for Citizens Advice Bureau, children's play parks, and other non-statutory provisions. It comes as the council must shed £1.74m this year through savings, reduced interest payments and a further £500,000 from "service delivery reviews". The purpose of any potential disposal of land, the meeting heard, is to bring in money for a council "in financial distress and we cannot incur further related costs".

Shaun Macdonald, leader of Surrey Heath Borough Council, said: "Car park, play parks, discretionary services, the support we give to the local community will go in the blink of an eye, so yes these are tough decisions but these were the

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tough decisions we were elected to make in order to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Two to four play parks can be renovated (instead) for young people to enjoy for the next 15 years. How many young people will benefit from that? Citizen's Advice Bureau funding, it can also support, potentially the provision of meals in people's homes."

These are the first tranche of sales the council is deciding on. Decisions made are being based on what the council considers is best for the entire borough, rather than the specific area affected. Car parking in Surrey Heath is particularly vulnerable as, by law, it does not need to be provided – and any council that declares itself bankrupt cannot spend money on discretionary services that do not pay for themselves. Parking in Surrey Heath loses money.

The London Road land sale, described as a "small plot", is said to have no value financially to the council but incurs unnecessary costs. Cllr Murray Rowlands (Labour: St Michaels) said it had been "blighted with fly-tipping and parking" and was "a serious problem that affects the whole of that part of Camberley." Cllr Macdonald added that it was "a fly tippers' paradise."

The Deepcut car park sale proved more divisive, and not just among the opposition members who were calling for the sale to be halted on the grounds that it would deprive the area of much needed parking spaces. Deepcut is undergoing a massive transformation with the former military barracks being turned into a huge redevelopment.

Cllr Cliff Betton (Liberal Democrats: Mytchett and Deepcut) said: "I fully understand the need for the council to raise funds from the sale of assets surplus to requirements. We have to have a balanced budget at least until the time the new unitary authority comes into being. After that, Surrey Heath Borough Council will cease to exist and it will be up to others to make decisions for the people of Deepcut. Everyone knows there are plans approved for Deepcut and it's now renamed Mindenhurst; 1,200 homes are being built, some are already completed and there are still another 800 still to come. Parking for the old Deepcut village pre-Mindenhurst was ok, it worked, sometimes a bit crowded but the car park was well used. But this will see just eight car park space increases in a village with 800 new homes, a ratio that doesn't even meet Surrey County Council's standards. If we want to build a better future for Deepcut, and Mindenhurst is part of that, we cannot build in parking blight from the outset. Woodend Road needs to stay as a car park."

Cllr Kel Finan-Cooke, property and economic development portfolio holder said: "We would prefer to not have to make decisions like this. We would prefer to not be in a position where we are need to achieve capital receipts to keep the lights on at Surrey Heath for the next two years but that's the situation we are in. We don't want to have to consider the sale of lands but we absolutely must."

Woodend Road Car Park in Deepcut (image Google)

Strip Woking's debt-man of his OBE MP says

20 September 2025

The "chief architect" behind the financial collapse of Woking Borough Council should be stripped of his OBE to local government, the town's MP has said. In 2023 the council declared itself effectively bankrupt with debts expected to pass £2.6billion on the back of a failed regeneration scheme. It has led to some communities resembling a 'bomb site', heaped huge tax rises on residents' bills and a gutting of popular public services.

Now, the town's MP has said one of the drivers of Woking's financial decisions should be held accountable. In February 2025, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) announced it was looking into the "professional standards" of two "individual accountants" – one of whom is Ray Morgan in respect of Woking Borough Council's operations and investment activities. Mr Morgan served as CEO for 14 years before retiring in March 2021 having been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2007 on the back of green initiatives he oversaw. His efforts even drew praise from King Charles while he was the Prince of Wales who said it was an example of local government "enhancing the wellbeing of its residents — now and in the future." Mr Morgan described being given the award as an honour and that he was disappointed the MP for Woking should seek its removal.

Mr Morgan was identified in November 2024 as being "the principal architect of the council's investment decisions" based on clear "documentary evidence and the information provided by stakeholders". Addressing the Houses of Parliament was the Woking MP Will Forster. He said: "The former chief executive of Woking borough council, Ray Morgan OBE, has been identified in a public interest report as the chief architect in bankrupting my council, leaving it with debts of £2 billion. Does the Leader of the House agree that the very least the Government could do is remove his OBE for services to local government? Will she agree to hold a debate in this House so that we can discuss Government policy on removing honours when wrongdoing has been committed?"

As well as singling out the actions of Mr Morgan, the MP also pushed for a debate on the removal of honours from any individual found to have committed serious failings in public office. Responding, Leader of the House Lucy Powell MP, said she was "really sorry" to hear about the case and urged him to contact the special committee that convenes to look

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whether individuals should be allowed to hold on to their honours where “there is a strong case for nominations to be removed.” She said: “It is absolutely right to say that we need to make sure that people are held accountable for their actions. Where they have received nominations, that is something that we should consider.”

Mr Forster said he has now formally submitted a letter to the Honours Secretariat calling Mr Morgan’s OBE to be removed. Mr Morgan said: “I was honoured to receive the OBE in 2007 and am disappointed that the MP for Woking should seek its removal.”

Image: Woking Borough Council chief executive Ray Morgan. Screengrab from webcast of Woking Borough Council meeting 11.02.21

Government bailout to ease Woking’s debt burden

20 September 2025

Taxpayers will cover the cost of Woking Borough Council’s financial folly after the government agreed to “aid the reduction” of the bankrupt authority’s multi-billion pound debt.

The bail out will initially cover debt owed by the borough in 2026-27 but could be extended if needed.

The pledge is an attempt to prevent Woking from immediately destroying any new authority it joins as part of the Government’s merger plans for Surrey’s councils.

Woking Borough Council declared itself effectively bankrupt in 2023 when its regeneration plans collapsed leaving it with debts expected to £2.6billion and annual repayments far outstripping what it brings in every year through council tax.

The problem has since spilled into neighbouring councils after the Government selected Surrey and its 11 boroughs and districts to become a newly devolved and reorganised and merged-mayoral authority.

On April 4, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said liabilities should be locally managed by councils.

Since then, the Government has committed to “supporting any new authorities in Surrey with the rationalisation of Woking’s assets, whether through the provision of interim financial support” it said this could be involve “further tranches of financial support for any remaining unsupported debt” until “new authorities are financially sustainable”.

The council would still be expected to continue cutting costs and finding “best value” for taxpayers by selling off its assets – even after the Surrey was reorganised, according to papers published this week.

Leader of Woking Borough Council, Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, said: “We welcome the government’s statement of intent regarding future financial support. It marks an important step towards addressing our debt position as part of wider discussions on the future structure of local government in Surrey.

“Whilst there is much still to be agreed, this announcement provides a degree of certainty as we continue to work closely with government and other Surrey councils to secure a sustainable financial future for Woking and ensure the best possible outcomes for residents.

“We are doing all we can to put our house in order by setting a balanced budget and having a strategic plan to sell assets. We remain committed to delivering our Improvement and Recovery Plan to the ensure that we enter any future arrangements in the strongest position possible.”

ENDS