Safety set back for a Council's car park revenue

Safety work to repair crumbled concrete and rusted steel reinforcements at the **Swan Car Park** in **Leatherhead** could cost a council more than £200,000.

Mole Valley District Council is set to approve the repair work after its emergency budget passed through its extraordinary scrutiny committee.

The car park is fully owned and operated by the council with all revenue going straight into its coffers. The flip side is that it is also responsible for 100 per cent of the maintenance costs.

The work will be carried out over a three-year period, which the council hopes will prevent anything more significant from developing.

It has set aside £116,496 for the first year, £49,745 in year two and £50,910 for the final year of the project for a total of £217,151.

The meeting heard from cabinet member Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson, who said that in 2022 the council carried out a five-year maintenance report that warned of the need to "monitor concrete and rebar (reinforced steel)" within the car park – and remedy any failings.

For financial reasons the council decided not to go ahead with any work but the situation earlier this year "had deteriorated."

She said: "It's not a health and safety issue at the moment however it is important that the works are remedied in order that they don't deteriorate any further."

The majority of the project's budget is expected to be used "primarily in relation to the concrete frame and repairs to concrete which has crumbled." Cllr Vyvyan-Robinson added.

A final decision on whether to proceed will be made by the council's cabinet committee on July 17 2024.

Officers told the meeting how surveyors had been monitoring the car park "visually" and that its condition has since stabilised.

The repairs, the council hopes, would eliminate the need for regular observations.

Asked if there was a risk of concrete falling off the walls, and onto people or their cars, officers replied that there wasn't an "immediate risk but the longer they leave it the greater that risk becomes".

Work will be scheduled to avoid the busiest times of the year and be done piecemeal to limit impact on people parking and minimise any revenue losses for the council.

Image: Swan shopping centre car park in Leatherhead (Google)

The cost of sending pupils to school

Surrey County Council (SCC) has been ordered to pay out £1,500 by the social care ombudsman for a 'service failure' in defaulting its legal duty to provide SEND transport to and from school. The local authority is already predicted an overspend of £7.3m on SEND school transport for its 2024-25 annual budget.

A family has received £1,500 after Surrey County Council (SCC) failed to provide a child with complex medical needs school transport adding pressure to the family. The boy missed 27 days of education as well as special needs provision, causing his mother and the wider family "avoidable" distress.

The provider suspended the child's transport after no longer feeling able to meet the boy's change in medical needs, on June 15, 2023. The boy waited for his school transport to pick him up the next morning but it did not arrive to collect him. It was not until lunchtime until the travel provider informed the Council that it had suspended its service.

SCC speedily offered the mum a travel allowance while it explored longer term solutions but she felt 'pressured' into taking this as she did not have the time to recruit carers. The travel allowance is a more cost-effective option than managed transport services.

Report documents detail the "avoidable distress, frustration and inconvenience" that the child's transport withdrawal caused his

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family. The social ombudsman said "the council did exactly what we would expect in the circumstances it found itself in" and it now has contracts with two ambulance-style providers able to transport children with complex medical needs.

A SCC spokesperson said it would not comment on individual cases and "although the report does recognise that we put appropriate mitigations in place, we accept the findings from the Ombudsman report and sincerely apologise for any distress caused".

They added: "We know how important it is for children and young people to have access to their education setting, however a lack of suitable providers has meant that some children who require specialist provision for high and/or complex medical needs have had to wait longer for appropriate arrangements than we would like. In these circumstances we always work actively with families to find a solution and offer measures such as personal travel allowances in the interim."

The ombudsman demanded the council pay his mother £1,000 in recognition of his missed education and SEN provision during the period he had no transport to school, plus £500 for the 'avoidable distress' it caused her and her family.

An overspend of £7.3m, all based on home to school transport, is already predicted one month into SCC's new budget for 2024-25. In 2023, SCC saw an overspend of £12m on SEND transport, with nearly a third of the transport costs being to independent schools outside of Surrey.

Rising demand, more travel days and anticipated increase in the number of children who need transport have contributed to a pressurised budget. SCC said it is reviewing all discretionary travel arrangements, tightening applications and is actively promoting personal travel allowance to manage costs.

A SCC spokesperson added: "We have seen a 64% increase in education, health and care needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, which has naturally had a knock on effect with a year on year increase in demand for Home to School Travel Assistance (HTSTA) as many children and young people with an education, health and care plan require HTSTA. This has resulted in a predicted overspend for this service."

Image: Credit: Arriva436 CC BY-SA 2.0

Failing children costs Council taxpayers half-million

Fines paid out by **Surrey County Council** for repeatedly failing children and young people topped half a million pounds in the past year - more than doubling its previous worst level. The council paid £540,611.59 in the last year to families who raised complaints through the children and social care watchdog.

It is an increase of £281,880, or 109 per cent, on 2023's figure – when the council said it was "working hard to improve services". Part of the "notable increase" is due to a change in guidance from the Ombudsman, which encourages local authorities to provide financial remedies earlier, as well as on an ongoing basis for delays to education, health and care (EHC) plans.

The council said it has cut its backlog of delayed care plans and is approaching the national norm.

Opposition members said ombudsman complaints and fines were just the tip of the iceberg and the trauma caused to families has long-lasting effects.

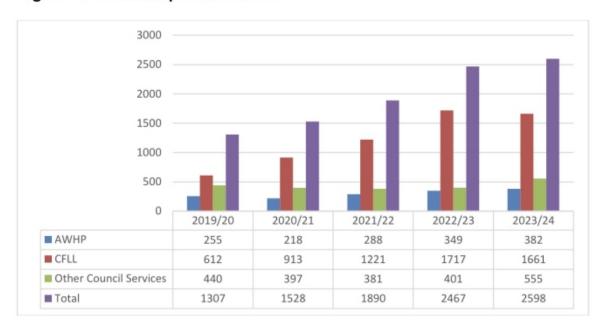


Figure 1: Total complaints received.

Dr **Julia Katherine**, Surrey County Council's interim director of education and lifelong learning said: "We are working hard to reduce spend on fines, which we know is higher than it should be." She added: "However, we recognise that delays in issuing EHC plans have also contributed to missed provision and subsequent fines, and we apologise for any distress caused to the children and families affected.

"As timeliness improves, provision will be put in place within normal service delivery rather than retrospectively through remedies and we naturally expect fines to fall in line with this. We have seen a 64 per cent increase in EHC needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, at a time of a national shortage of educational psychologists, and this has naturally had an impact."

Dr Katherine said the council had prioritised how it was addressing timelines and had reduced the number of delayed EHC plan requests from 1,658 in October 2023 to about 100 by the end of May 2024 – and is on track to eliminate the backlog altogether.

She said: "This should ultimately result in improved timeliness of assessments, putting Surrey in line with national levels, from June 2024, and in turn an improved experience for families and a reduction in the need for financial remedies. We are resolute in our ambition to continue to improve services and outcomes for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future."

According to the council's own figures, £107,102.50 was paid in "symbolic financial remedies" in recognition of the "distress and anxiety and time and trouble taken in pursuing" complaints, an increase of £19,656.85 (11 per cent) when compared to the previous 12 months.

The council paid £255,318 because of problems in its education services, including a single payout of £12,900 which included missed education and delay. There were also two one-off payments of £12,486 and £12,400 for loss of education provision and delay. Children's social care shortcomings cost £74,441 with £43,245 to one family to acknowledge financial support errors. The figures were released ahead of the June 5 meeting of its Audit and Governance committee.

Councillor **Catherine Powell**, leader of the residents group at Surrey County Council, said "I'm sad but it doesn't surprise me. The half a million is devastating for the families, it's devastating that its money not being spent on services, but it's all the other families that are not even able to take it to that point. To go through to the ombudsman, you kind of have to have money behind you and there are an awful lot of people who don't and they just end up sitting in the system."

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She added: "Once you've traumatised a child you don't untraumatise them, they learn to live with it and that's where the long-term mental health issue can. "The parents of these children are under extreme strain. If we don't support the parents in the right way, we are actually creating long term health issues for the parents as well because they are burnt out and unable to cope. I hear it's a very isolating experience.

"If you have a child not in school regularly there are lots of things you can't do, you can't work and you have to support the child in an intense day-to-day way. It's very hard."

Cllr Powell added (the council) has "put money into educational psychologists and the service believes it will get the backlog down but the reality is not just that, but the support we provide along the way."

Missed education provision meant the council had to reimburse parents £222,657 in symbolic financial payments to recognise each month missed. These are payments the council should be spending to meet assessed needs irrespective of a complaint being made.

In the past year, Surrey County Council recorded a total of 1,661 complaints in its children, families and lifelong learning service – down from 1,771 the previous year.

Only a "very small number of complaints" escalate to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, the council said, with the vast majority successfully resolved and responded to by the local authority.

Cllr **Will Forster**, leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said: "We have highlighted Surrey County Council's awful record of protecting vulnerable young people before. All too often the Ombudsman has found the county council wanting. This is an awful way to spend taxpayers' money, and on lawyers fees fighting these judgements. The cases that come to the ombudsman area only when parents have fought and pushed through the system to get to this point. There will be so many more failures that carers and young people aren't able to complain about."

Banded together to fight the band

A decades-long council tax battle has been won netting residents of a retirement village up to £9,000 each after it was ruled all 113 people there had been in the wrong rate band. Their victory means the former Band E and D homes have now been reclassified and moved down one level to Band D and C - with the rebate backdating back to 1993.

Those who have live at the Oaklands Park retirement village in Redhill, built in 1989, will also be saving about £500 a year going forward at the former B and E homes. Marilyn Rodd, described as a "force of nature", chairs the Oaklands Park Residents Association, and it was her refusal to give up that ultimately won the day. She said: "We're just in disbelief really. It was a complete turnaround we didn't expect it, we didn't expect it to go back that far, its a huge result for income-limited pensioners, £500 a year in your council tax for couples. It's disbelief and absolute joy and everyone is thrilled. There is happiness at Oaklands Park."

The Redhill retirement village features 113 one or two-bed flats, bungalows, and houses. They were originally sold as top-of-the-range homes because, at the time, the concept of a retirement village was unusual. Their prices soon came crashing down as people sold and moved on – before finding their natural market value at significantly less than originally priced.

Four years after they were built the Government introduced Council Tax – where people are charged based on the value of their property. The Valuation Office Agency, responsible for setting council tax bands, looked at the prices the homes were originally sold, and their high bands have remained.

That ruling, which residents have been fighting against ever since, has meant the retirement community has been paying Band E and D rates for their small flats, bungalows and houses for years when they should not have been.

Mrs Rodd said: "We did it as a collective. It shows the power of banding together. It took a lot of research to understand how it works. It was doggedness and a lot of research and most of all it was getting everybody working together."

From the start, they had the support of their MP and local council. Mrs Rodd said: "People move down from bigger houses and are shocked to find out its still band E. Every time someone moves in they query it. But we haven't taken no as an answer." She added: "The big difference was – they would compare the houses individually within the estate and say 'your house is in the same band as your neighbour'.

"We had to get them to look outside the estate."

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She added: "We are very grateful to the VOA and the council that they've decided to correct this long standing anomaly or injustice. It's nobody's fault as such it's just the system."

Councillor Jonathan Essex (Redhill East, Green) told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "This lady took up the challenge, pulled together a comparison of properties to show the homes were out of line. It was submitted and lost, but then it was challenged and she needed to get every single resident on board, no mean feat. Then we finally heard back.

"This lady was a force of nature, it was her determination and persistence that made it all happen and it was a pleasure to support her. This gives people hope."

A Reigate and Banstead Borough Council spokesperson said: "While the setting of Council Tax bands, and any associated appeals, are the remit of the Valuation Office Agency of HM Revenue & Customs, we are responsible for collecting Council Tax. We want people to pay the right amount and, where refunds are necessary, we aim to refund taxpayers as quickly as possible."

The VOA said it could not comment on individual cases but that it works "extremely hard to ensure that all domestic properties are banded correctly" for Council Tax purposes. They added: "If a taxpayer thinks their band is wrong, they are able to contact us to submit a formal or informal challenge."

Annual audit of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

The annual Grant Thornton Auditor's Report on the workings of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has delivered a positive assessment of its performance across financial sustainability, governance, and value for money, despite acknowledging the ongoing challenges the Council faces. The report was formally presented and noted at the Council meeting of 14th May.

Financial Sustainability: The report highlights that the Council operates in a challenging financial environment with prudent short and medium-term planning. While financial stability remains dependent on continual savings plans, the forecast indicates a need to deliver approximately £1.4 million in savings by 2027/28. The auditors emphasized the importance of finding alternatives to using reserves to manage budget gaps, noting no significant weaknesses in financial sustainability arrangements.

Governance: The Council's governance structure was praised for maintaining appropriate arrangements and compliance policies. An updated Risk Management Strategy and adherence to CIPFA's Good Governance Framework were noted as strengths. However, the auditors recommended prioritizing the completion of management actions and reviewing the composition of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee to potentially include independent members.

Value for Money: The Council's efforts to ensure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness were aligned with delivering value for money. Recommendations were made to develop a partnership governance framework and to address underperformance in processing minor planning applications, despite improvements seen in 2023.

Overall, the audit reflects positively on the Council's operations, suggesting continued disciplined financial management and strategic governance enhancements.

o ACriteria	2022/23 Risk assessment	2022/23 Auditor judgement on arrangements		2021/22 Auditor judgement on arrangements	
Financial sustainability	No risk of significant weakness identified.	G	Our work did not identify any areas where we considered that key or improvement recommendations were required	Д	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but two improvement recommendations have been made.
Governance	No risk of significant weakness identified.	А	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but three improvement recommendations made	А	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified but two improvement recommendations raised.
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	No risk of significant weakness identified.	А	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but one improvement recommendation made to support more effective partnership working arrangements.	G	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and no improvement recommendations raised.
A No signi	ficant weaknesses in arrangement	s ider	ntified or improvement recommendation made. ntified, but improvement recommendations made. ied and key recommendations made.		

The four key recommendations in more detail and the responses of EEBC management:

Grant Thornton Recommendation 1: Timely Internal Audits.

The auditors suggested that internal audits focusing on financial controls should be completed before the end of the financial year to aid the Head of Internal Audit in forming their opinion.

EEBC Management Response: Acknowledging the importance of timely audits, management noted past challenges due to staff turnover and long-term sickness, which have now been resolved. With a fully resourced team, management is confident in meeting the audit schedule, with progress monitored by both the Strategic Leadership Team and the Audit & Scrutiny Committee.

Grant Thornton Recommendation 2: Monitoring Framework for Audit Actions

The council was advised to develop a framework to monitor management actions identified in internal audit reports, ensuring these are completed by the agreed due dates to enhance clarity and accountability.

EEBC Management Response: Management emphasized that a robust monitoring framework is already in place, with the Business Assurance team logging all actions and requiring quarterly updates from Heads of Service. Additionally, new performance management software has been procured to further improve monitoring capabilities.

Grant Thornton Recommendation 3: Audit & Scrutiny Committee Composition

Auditors recommended reviewing the composition of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee to exclude Strategy & Resources members for independence and considering the appointment of independent members.

EEBC Management Response: Management revealed that a review of the committee's operations is already planned following a Corporate Peer Challenge in March 2024. The audit recommendation will be considered during this review in consultation with relevant members.

Grant Thornton Recommendation 4: Partnership Governance Framework

To enhance partnership working, the council was advised to develop a governance framework to guide and evaluate the success and effectiveness of these collaborations.

EEBC Management Response: Management expressed a commitment to positive partnership working, acknowledging recognition from the recent Corporate Peer Challenge. This recommendation will be considered in conjunction with the Action Plan resulting from the Peer Challenge.

County Councillor Community funding

Surrey residents can now apply for cash grants to improve their local area through the Your Councillor Community Fund. Last year the Fund supported over 380 community projects via Surrey County Councillors, totalling £404,330.

This community fund is flexibly designed to help with costs that can range from purchasing sports equipment for local clubs, to the creation of websites, providing financial support to community groups and projects that improve the quality of life in for residents in Surrey.

Each year, Surrey County Council's 81 councillors each allocate £5,000 of funding within their local communities. With their deep understanding of the needs and priorities of their communities they can ensure that the funding is targeted to areas where it is most needed and where it can make the biggest impact. It can be used across a variety of projects that help promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their communities.

Surrey County Council Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Customer and Communities Denise Turner-Stewart said: "As a council we are committed to working together with communities to improve the lives of people living or working in Surrey. The Your Councillor Community Fund is a great example of how even a small amount of funding can make a big difference in the communities we serve. These initiatives can help to deliver such things as sports for fitness, places to come together, providing facilities that help improve health and wellbeing and in other cases an improved pride in their local areas.

"It embodies our commitment to empowering local residents to have a say and make a real difference in their own communities. By supporting initiatives driven by the passion and dedication of our residents, we aim to create vibrant, inclusive communities where everyone thrives".

The Your Councillor Community Fund is open now and closes in January 2025.

To apply for money from this year's Your Councillor Community Fund you should contact your Epsom and Ewell Councillor. They are:

Epsom Town & Downs Steven McCormick Epsom Town & Downs Residents Association **Steven.McCormick@surreycc.gov.uk**

Epsom West Bernie Muir Epsom West Conservative bernie.muir@surreycc.gov.uk

Ewell John Beckett Ewell Residents Association john.beckett@surreycc.gov.uk

Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington Eber Kington Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington Residents Association **Eber.Kington@surreycc.gov.uk**

More information can be found here Your Councillor Community Fund - Surrey County Council (surreycc.gov.uk).

Examples of projects funded last year include:

£1,493 to help make Spelthorne cleaner and greener by providing group litter picking equipment which can be loaned out to encourage individuals, groups and schools to adopt an area for regular picking and to take a pride in their local environment.

£2,000 towards equipment for the 2023 Shepperton Village Fair, including banners, sail flags, display board and cashless payment devices.

£700 towards replacing a 25-year-old table tennis table used by Leatherhead U3A Table Tennis Group, helping to keep members physically and socially active.

£1,000 towards new uniforms for Godalming Youth Band. The new polo shirts and hoodies are more suitable for events all year round and will be loaned out, much like the instruments, to help keep music-making as accessible as possible.

As well as Your Councillor Community Funding, there is also funding available via Your Fund Surrey for small and large community projects. Visit **www.surreycc.gov.uk/yourfund** to find out more.

Image: Left to right - County Councillors McCormick, Muir, Beckett and Kington

Spelthorne in financial trouble

Inspectors have been sent to Spelthorne Borough Council as concern grows over its ability to deal with its extreme debt and borrowing. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has been working with the borough since May 2022 and now the Secretary of State has weighed in over the "authority's extremely high levels of debt and borrowing".

A letter to Spelthorne Borough Council's chief executive, confirming the department's decision to appoint Lesley Seary to carry out a formal inspection of the council over its capital risk was published on Wednesday, May 8.

It read: "As of March 31 2023, Spelthorne's debt was £1.096 billion, which was 87.1 times the council's core spending power and 52.4 times its total service expenditure."

The average borough council has a debt to spending ratio of 5.65.

A July review of the borough's finances also found the council needed "expert independent support" to assist with its "immediate and ongoing financial challenges" and required help to mitigate its risk as well as improve its governance and decision-making culture.

It comes just four months after another Surrey authority, Runnymede Borough Council was served a notice over its finances, and a year after Woking Borough Council declared itself bankrupt.

Concerns over the council's finances date back to a 2017/18 report from accountants KPMG – published in November 2022. It highlighted concerns over the council's investments and set out the auditor's view that Spelthorne Borough Council had acted unlawfully in borrowing and then purchasing three properties.

The Secretary of State has given certain directions to Lesley Seary's inspection. First, she will examine concerns over the council's governance and scrutiny, with particular attention to its financial arrangements and decision making. She is also looking into the council's ability to carry out its new housing strategy, as well as the impact its investment portfolio has had on service delivery.

The inspector, who will have right-of-access to all council premises and documents, will then report her findings to the Secretary of State by August 30. The council has also been told it cannot destroy any documentation or records.

The letter was sent as part of a best value directive from DLUHC. As part of the process the council must publish its response, together with the letters on its website.

The statement from Spelthorne Borough Council read: "Over a year ago, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) asked the professional body for public sector finance, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), to review Spelthorne Borough Council's investment portfolio and borrowing position.

"The authority has now received a letter from the department advising that they have appointed an independent inspector to undertake a review of Spelthorne Borough Council to seek assurance that the Council complying with its Best Value Duty.

"The Secretary of State decided to commission this inspection to provide him with direct, independent assurance that the council has 'arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, with regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.'

"The government letter outlines concerns around debt relative to size of the Council's budget and governance whilst acknowledging that Spelthorne Borough Council has engaged constructively with the Department since 2022 and already taken action to mitigate risk.

"DLUHC has appointed Lesley Seary as Lead Inspector, who is independent of government, and has asked her to report her findings to the Secretary of State by 30 August 2024."

Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Councillor Joanne Sexton welcomed the review and would work with the inspector and her team.

She said: "This administration has taken many decisive and positive steps since the May 2023 election including instigating a full

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external independent review of our commercial property portfolio. Additionally, we have reduced future borrowing requirements by nearly £200m and are pursuing alternative ways to deliver more affordable housing. We will continue to work with DLUHC in an open and transparent way and look forward to receiving the findings of the report."

"The rental income received from our commercial property portfolio more than covers the financing costs and provides a significant contribution to support council services, additionally there is a reserve to cover possible income variation in future years."

Spelthorne's neediest lose out on housing

'Crisis point' in local government funding

Relative relief about Epsom and Ewell's debt?

Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Ashford East councillor Joanne Sexton, at the council building in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

Little solace for Guildford from fraud report

Weak governance and poor scrutiny at Guildford Borough Council created a 'quick fix culture' that allowed potentially millions of pounds to be defrauded from the public purse while vulnerable housing tenants suffered, a new report has found.

The council has apologised unreservedly and pledged to adopt every recommendation – of which there are more than 70 – after a Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) review found its practices posed a serious risk to residents.

The report, released on Tuesday May 7, covered how the culture at the council created an environment where housing budgets were able to skyrocket and pushed the authority towards bankruptcy.

It covers a general overview of the stages that lead to an arrest, two council staff members being suspended, and five agency workers having their contracts terminated.

In February 2022, the council agreed to invest a total of £24.5m to bring its housing stock up to standard and a three-year contract with a value of £5.4m was agreed for testing and inspection. In less than three years that ballooned to £18.9m spent – a £13.5m overspend.

There was an increase in complaints concerning repairs and enhancements from tenants, the review found. This happened while the Housing Surveyor Team was vacant and had no permanent surveyors.

The report read: "This lack of in-house expertise and capacity meant that the council often didn't inspect and check work and were reliant upon agency staff. There was also incompleteness of data which compounded matters." It added: "After making initial enquiries, it came to light that there was concern regarding risk to the council and the following matters were raised:

That work may have been ordered when it wasn't necessary. *That work may have been ordered, invoiced and paid for when it was not completed at all or *Not to a satisfactory standard. *That duplicate invoices may have been submitted and paid for the same work. *That works may have been ordered and undertaken that were not the responsibility of the council.

This triggered a criminal investigation in August 2023 resulting in the suspension of two employees and five agency workers having their contracts terminated.

Whistleblowers first raised the alarm in September 2022 but it was not until 2023 that serious action into how housing budgets of about £5.4m a year had ballooned to more than £17m.

The initial investigation was conducted by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council's anti-fraud unit before being handed over to the South East Regional Organised Crime Unit of the Police.

The council then ordered a series of reviews, with the results published late on Tuesday, May 7 – although the allegations of potential fraud were outside the review's scope.

Despite that shortcoming, the review did find there was serious failure to follow due process in the procurement and management of housing maintenance contacts.

The council has now published an in-depth improvement plan, with more than 70 recommendations, to address every finding from the two reports, and, it says, to ensure it provides services that residents and businesses can be proud of.

Leader of the Council, Councillor Julia McShane, said: 'The people of Guildford deserve better from their council and for that we



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give a heartfelt apology and a commitment to put right the long-standing issues which we have uncovered. We have invited scrutiny and embrace accountability and will not rest until we have a resilient, well managed council of which we can all be proud.'

Deputy leader, Cllr **Tom Hunt**, said: 'We apologise unreservedly to the residents and taxpayers of Guildford. The SOLACE reports identify serious issues around the council's governance, operations, and controls. This is unacceptable. We are utterly determined to root out every problem and to put matters right. The people of Guildford deserve nothing less.'

Pedro Wrobel, chief executive of Guildford and Waverley Borough Councils, said: "I recognise everything that the SOLACE reports identify, and accept all the findings in full. This is not okay, and I came here to deal with it. Over the past two and half months, we have been developing a comprehensive Improvement Plan to address the issues at Guildford Borough Council. It addresses every recommendation from these reports and goes further.

"I am delighted with the appointment of the Independent Assurance Panel. It is critical that we make everything open and transparent. We are here to do the right thing, not the easy thing. I am determined to ensure the council is sustainable, delivers excellent value for money, and provides services that our residents and businesses can be proud of.

"We will not do this alone. I look forward to working with partners and our communities and businesses to make Guildford a brilliant place to live, work and do business."

A police investigation and an employment investigation carried out by an external law firm are continuing, the council said.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service has read through the documents with this being the first of several stories to be written about the findings.

Further stories will look in greater detail at the steps the council is taking, the impact of the merger with Waverley Borough Council and the views of the community and residents.

Related reports:

Police probe abuse of public funds

Good money goes after bad

Surrey County Council staff strike poll

Staff at **Surrey County Council** are voting on whether to go on strike after receiving a revised pay offer which union bosses say is not good enough.

Union chiefs representing workers, including teachers and firefighters, have described the ballot as one of the most important in the branch's history and that it was time to make a stand against low pay.

The ballot papers were sent out to staff on May 7 and run until June 4 - when staff will decide whether to accept the council's revised offer or support the walk out.

Surrey Council leader, Councillor **Tim Oliver** (Conservative) said it was important the authority "lived within its means" and that the offer was final. He said the council remained committed to getting the matter resolved so staff could receive pay increases as soon as possible.

Surrey Pay comprises pay bands PS1/2 to PS14 and pay bands for senior managers PS15 to Chief Executive. The council's original offer of between £1,124 to £1,682 for grades PS3-PS9, was overwhelmingly rejected. Unions had been asking for a £3,500 increase across the board.

In March, workers warned the local authority of a potential walkout after a "record number" of people backed strike action – unless there was a significantly improved pay offer. The council came back and is now offering a £1,800 increase to all staff on PS6 and below, unions have said. Those on between PS7 and PS10 are still on the old deals. Sick pay will return to six months full pay and six months half pay, double its current levels.

Lead negotiator **Paul Couchman** has said this shows the council can be moved. He said: "This is going to be one of the most important votes in our UNISON branch history. The council has already shown that we can move them. We believe we can get a better, fairer, offer if we get a result in this ballot.

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"Last year we were just 40 votes short of reaching the legal minimum of 50 per cent of members voting. This is the year we make a stand."

Earlier this year a consultative online ballot was held with 53 per cent of members responding, 87 per cent of whom voted to reject the offer and 91 per cent saying they would support strike action if there wasn't a significantly improved offer.

The Strike Committee felt the council has not moved far enough and has moved to a full postal legal strike ballot. The two general trade unions representing employees said members were being left behind - both national pay awards as well as most other local councils.

According to the unions about a thirds of Surrey staff are paid below a 'minimum standard of income', based on research provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The revised offer would see the lowest hourly rate of pay would be £12.04, higher than both the Real Living Wage and Statutory National Living Wage.

Unison is asking its members to reject the offer.

It comes as, last February, there was a "catastrophic" Surrey payroll glitch that left workers unable to pay mortgages or afford food for their children "We really do deserve better," a statement from Unison read.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council: "We have made a revised improved final offer and remain committed to getting the matter resolved so that our staff can receive their pay increase as soon as possible. However it's imperative that the offer is within our means.

"The council is not immune to the challenges of the current economic landscape, rising costs and inflation pressures, and we must ensure we remain in a position to deliver vital public services and protect our most vulnerable in our communities throughout."

Related reports:

Surrey County Council workers to strike?

County CEO's pay rise triggering strikes?

Community fund open for bids

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is inviting community groups and organisations to bid for neighbourhood funds raised by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), to deliver projects that will support new development and benefit Epsom & Ewell residents across the borough. Bidding opens on 7 May for six weeks, closing on 18 June.

The CIL raises funds from developers in recognition that new development creates pressure on local infrastructure. It is spent on the provision, improvement, replacement, operation, or maintenance of local infrastructure. Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has invested more than £210,000 from the 2022/23 Neighbourhood CIL Fund in community infrastructure projects including:

- Replacing playground equipment in Rosebery Park and Alexandra Recreation Ground
- Repairing pathways in Nonsuch Park to ensure they are safe and accessible
- Upcoming works to support biodiversity and improve visitor experience, including an additional new bench, at Stamford Green Pond.

Councillor **Steven McCormick**, (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, said "I strongly urge local community groups and organisations to take this opportunity to bid for funds for community projects and initiatives that can improve quality of life for residents in Epsom & Ewell.

The Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy Fund offers us the chance to deliver projects that have a real impact on our communities, for example enhancing access to the countryside, improving accessibility and facilities in our parks and open spaces, improving health and safety for example by installing public water fountains, and more."

The bidding process is designed to be as clear as possible. Information on the process can be found in section 6 of the CIL Spending Protocol.



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Bids will be shortlisted using the criteria set out in section 7 of the CIL Spending Protocol. Shortlisted bids will be presented to the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee for approval and, for any spend over £50,000, then to the Strategy and Resources Committee.

Image: Rosebery Park - children's recreation area. Google