EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

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Surrey social landlord downgraded by regulator

4 January 2024

Problems with repairs, service charges, complaints, damp and mould, contributed to one of Surrey's largest social housing landlords being downgraded by regulators for failing its tenants.

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) found that issues at A2Dominion had "crystalised over a breadth of areas" which "resulted in poor outcomes for its tenants".

The report, published on Wednesday January 3 said A2Dominion had been working to make improvements but had not yet been able to deliver the changes required. This led to poor quality data, poor reporting, and the board not having effective oversight.

Harold Brown, senior assistant director for investigations and enforcement at RSH, said: "We found significant issues with A2Dominion's data and its business planning, risk and control framework, leading to a failure by the provider to manage key risks effectively. A2Dominion is working with us to address these issues and we will continue to monitor the provider as it works to return to compliance."

The group owns and manages more than 38,000 homes across 79 local authority areas in London, the South East and Wiltshire. The majority of its housing stock is for general needs. It also has significant levels of shared ownership housing as well as supported or sheltered accommodation. A2Dominion, as a charitable housing association, must meet certain regulatory standards over how it is run.

Its new board took over in September 2022 and referred itself to RSH following concerns over the quality of some services, as well as its financial position. A2Dominion was then under review for three months while it was investigated for potential non-compliance.

n a letter to stakeholders, CEO Ian Wardle said: "We know that outcomes for some customers have been poor. Earlier this year, we issued an apology to customers who had been adversely affected. While we have made some improvements, work is still underway to fully resolve issues with repairs, service charges, complaints, damp and mould, latent defects and the roles and responsibilities with managing agents. We also know that our services aren't as responsive as they could be. In some of these areas, we aren't always delivering the high standards we set ourselves and customers expect."

The regulator downgraded A2Dominion from G1, which means a provider meets governance requirements, to G3 where there are issues of serious regulatory concern which the provider is working to improve. It's financial position is unchanged. The new grading does not affect services and it will continue to deliver its day-to-day operations as normal.

Mr Wardle said: "Over the past few months, we've been in positive and constructive discussions with the regulator following our self-referrals. We've welcomed the opportunity to identify further steps that we can take to make improvements for our customers and the communities we serve. "The regulator has confirmed that it has assurance that we have an adequately funded business plan in the short term, sufficient security in place, and is forecast to continue to meet its financial covenants.

"Since I joined in September 2022, we've had a new chair of the board appointed, many new board members, and changes to our management team. All our colleagues are passionate about what we do. However, in far too many instances, colleagues haven't had the resources and processes to fully deliver outstanding customer service. It is my job to fix this, and we've made improvements throughout 2023, with more planned in 2024.

"At the same time historic decisions on development schemes, tougher trading conditions and rising costs have affected our finances, but we will weather the storm. We've already made a number of significant improvements in relation to customer complaints and have prioritised our commitment to social housing as the core of our business, including our exit from care services and fine tuning our development strategy so we can focus on getting things right first time for our customers. We also remain financially strong, with an A credit rating from Fitch, £3.6 billion of assets, and over £300 million of undrawn available facilities.

"I look forward to continuing to work closely with the regulator following their decision, and will collaborate on the steps we need to take to return to our previous rating."

Image: A2dominion Home

Underinvestment hits most vulnerable

4 January 2024

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The “most vulnerable” people in Woking will be made to find new homes after their extra care facility failed vital fire safety checks and was “all but condemned”. Brockhill Extra Care Housing, in Clifton Way, has space for 48 apartments over two floors with a waiting list to get in.

In February this year **Surrey Fire and Rescue** conducted a review of the home prompting Woking Borough Council to introduce a Waking Watch – where trained people continually patrol a building and its perimeter to detect fires and raise alarms.

The facility changed its emergency procedures from Stay Put to Evacuate. The council also upgraded its fire detection systems. Many still can’t evacuate the building fast enough, leaving the bankrupt council with the decision of spending £5.8 million on a complete refit, or closing the fire trap.

A meeting of its executive committee, on Thursday, December 14, concluded the home open was no longer viable, regardless of the council’s finances, and residents, families and other stakeholders would be consulted over the closure of the Brockhill Extra Care Housing scheme. According to papers presented to councillors, the building appears to have had limited investment with only minor works carried – meaning it now requires “major capital works over the next two years and beyond”.

Its’ boiler failed a year ago causing “considerable inconvenience and discomfort to residents and staff” and is beyond repair.

Residents currently rely on a temporary heating but the entire system is “aged and in poor condition and requires upgrading and renewing. Since then, no new people have been allowed to move to the home, occupancy has dropped to 68 per cent and, where possible, the council has tried to moved residents to the ground floor to aid evacuation.

The anticipated total capital expenditure required on Brockhill over the next 10 years is forecast to be about £5.8 million, according to the report.

Deputy leader of the council, Cllr Will Forster, said: “The fire risk assessment has all but condemned that building. Particularly with the clients that we have in there. They are just so vulnerable, they have to leave the building so quickly in the event of a fire, because of the type of building it is. And that’s just not humanly possible for them.”

Any decision around Brockhill will have implications and put additional cost pressures on adult social care budgets with the council admitting that this will be difficult and upsetting for people living and working Brockhill, as well as the families of residents living there.

Leader of the Council, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker said: “Its obviously heartbreaking for me to see this.
“I know what a well loved and valued facility it is.” She added: “But we have had a significant fire risk arising from a fire brigade assessment. We’ve known some of this work was needed we’ve been working in the last year we’ve done work on fire doors fire alarms, having a waking watching place to protect residents but the fire services have now determined that its just not safe for the most vulnerable and it’s so urgent that those most vulnerable people do need to move as soon as possible.”

Cllr Ellen Nicholson (LD, Mount Hermon) said: “The residents there are some of the most vulnerable in Woking and I find it incredibly sad that the chronic underprovision and the legacy of mismanagement has led to these fire risks and these safety risks for these incredibly vulnerable people.”

Image Brockhill care home – Google

Green Belt off or relaxed a notch?

4 January 2024

Excitement has been stirred by **Michael Gove**‘s announcement 19th December that housing targets are advisory not mandatory. This change *may* mean a shift in **Epsom and Ewell**‘s Draft Local Plan away from earmarking any Green Belt for housing developments.

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The local campaign group **Epsom and Ewell Green Belt** has reacted to the news. In a press release issued today they urge **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**: “Together with the Surrey Branch of the **Campaign to Protect Rural England** (CPRE), is calling on the Council and its Councillors to instruct the planning officers to republish its Local Plan within the next few weeks, removing all greenbelt sites, reducing the housing target to a rational approximately 3,500 homes for the Plan period, and focusing on developing all available brownfield sites. We have produced a list of the changes that would need to be made to the draft Plan so that it complies with the Government’s revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).”

However, accompanying the publication of the revised NPPF Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities Michael Gove said “The new NPPF was not a route to the evasion of responsibilities. Local authorities must provide rigorous evidence justifying their departure from assessed housing needs. They must do everything to identify other lands suitable for development.” He added “While the planning inspectorate will respect well-made cases, it will not accept undershooting that is not firmly rooted in environmental or other safeguards. This is about sensitive adjustment in housing targets, not their abandonment.”

Related reports:

Green Belt development objections excluded

Public meeting on Local Plan dominated by greenbelters.

Green-belters belted up and beltless

Green-belters seeing red on Local Plan?

and many more – search “Local Plan”.

Anchored in reason on local housing need?

4 January 2024

The Draft Local Plan lacks a proper negotiating position on future house building numbers in the Borough of Epsom and Ewell. So said an unnamed member of the public who addressed last week’s Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee.

Let Epsom and Ewell Times know your view. Is he right or wrong? Here is his speech in full:

“Good evening, everyone. The first thing they teach you about negotiations at business school is the power of anchoring. Government has deployed this tactic very successfully. Government’s standard method results in a target of 10,368 new dwellings over the Local Plan period. Let’s be clear: this target is government’s negotiation anchor. It is not our borough’s actual housing need; it is simply designed to pressure you into setting a high housing target.

You might not realize that you are in a negotiation, but you are. Although the draft Local Plan recognizes that government’s target is unachievable, it has still succeeded in anchoring council’s thinking throughout the Local Plan. First, you note that your 3,700 from brownfield sites only meet 36% of government’s anchor. Then you use that fact to declare exceptional circumstances. Afterward, you set your own housing target at just over half of government’s anchor. That is the classic response of an inexperienced negotiator.

What the draft Local Plan did not discuss was our actual need for new dwellings. Strategic plans should always be based on the best available information, and yet the draft Local Plan did not even mention our actual need for new housing. It is very important for the council to prominently and clearly explain within the Local Plan why government’s anchor of 10,368 is flawed and why our actual housing need is for just 2,664 new dwellings. By doing this, you will demolish government’s anchor and replace it with the council’s own anchor. It is absolutely critical to anchor everyone’s thinking to the real needs of our borough.

The figure of 2,664 new dwellings is obtained by making just two changes to the standard method: firstly, replacing the outdated 2014 household projections with the more up-to-date 2018 data, and secondly, removing the flawed 40% affordability uplift. The theory behind this uplift is that by flooding the market with new homes, you will drive prices down. This theory is flawed for two reasons: firstly, house builders engage in land banking; they hold back most of their consented land and drip-feed new houses onto the market at a rate that matches demand and maintains prices. Secondly, the affordability uplift assumes that Epsom is a separate market for housing—it is not. If the Competition and Markets Authority were to look at this, the first thing they would do would be to define the relevant markets. They would note the existence of an unbroken chain of substitution across the whole Greater London Commuter Zone and conclude that Epsom just forms a very small part of a very large market. Flooding with new homes will not reduce house prices in the borough due to any supply-demand imbalance. Any reduction in local house prices will be as a result of the borough becoming a

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less serene and less attractive place to live.

According to paragraph 1.61 of the draft Local Plan, the balance between protecting our environment and enabling development is at the centre of our spatial strategy. At present, the Local Plan is unbalanced. You are planning to build more than twice the number of new dwellings that we actually need by sacrificing some of our best-performing Greenfield Green Belt sites."

Related reports:

Epsom Town Centre Masterplan Unveiled

Housing need or desire?

Can Epsom and Ewell get more dense?

Little plots of Council land for housing?

More affordable housing now. Cllr Kate Chinn

MP's housing solution for Epsom and Ewell

Image credits: Anchor – © Peter Facey licenced under cc-by-sa/2.0. New houses: © David Dixon licenced under cc-by-sa/2.0

The Plot in the thick of planning options

4 January 2024

At a meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Strategy and Resources Committee held on 13th July it was decided that various Council owned "brownfield" sites would not be offered up for development for housing in the long-awaited Local Plan. This followed a note from the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee of 15th June that "Officers have written to the Council in its capacity as landowner to check the availability of additional sites for promotion through the call for sites process". I.e., promotion in the Local Plan for housing development.

Most of the Council portfolio on the Kiln Lane and Longmead industrial, retail and commercial areas are held on long-leases. Plot 8, in the far north-east corner of Kiln Lane was held by Wilsons, the car sale emporium, on a 10 year lease that expired in 2019. This was one plot, bordered by housing to the east, that could potentially ease pressure on other land, including green-belt, to deliver on new housing targets. Presently, it is an open area used for storing motor vehicles.

It is understood that with the lease having expired the Council could regain possession upon a redevelopment being planned. However, at the meeting of the same committee held on 21st September it was decided to authorise the grant of a new lease. Details of the new lease were excluded from public and press view at the meeting to protect the privacy of financial and commercial information of a third party, presumably Wilsons.

The length of the lease has not been disclosed but will in due course be available to public view at HM Land Registry.

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) told Epsom and Ewell Times "I voted in favour of extending the lease, as the business wished to continue and it provides much needed income for the council. The details of the lease are part of a restricted document as is normal in these cases. However it was a well thought out contract that does not stop the local plan work. It maybe several years before both the local plan is complete and a developer comes forward with an alternative plan for plot 8."

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) said: "Labour knows that there is a need to build homes, but also to keep people in jobs. What the council needs is a fully thought through local plan that resolves competing requirements for land. Unfortunately the hopelessly divided Residents Association administration hasn't been able to achieve this. It is also important to maintain the council's income when cash for vital services is stretched."

Epsom Civic Society maintains a watchful citizen's eye on planning matters and its Chair, **Margaret Hollins** told Epsom and Ewell Times "Epsom Civic Society supports retention and encouragement of strategic employment sites which are significant drivers of the local economy. No information is publicly available about the terms and duration of the lease so it is difficult to comment further.

"The Society considers that any attempts to cram residential dwellings along with industrial and commercial activities need to be avoided. Mixed residential and employment use could only be achieved through a carefully conceived regeneration strategy which would need to ensure proper separation between any residential areas and noise/disturbance/air pollution issues that can often occur with the type of distribution/warehousing activities prevalent on the existing industrial estates."

A spokesperson for the Council responded: "On 13 July 2023, Strategy & Resources Committee considered the land

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availability of several Council owned sites including the Longmead and Kiln Lane Industrial Sites. The decision was taken not to include the industrial sites and they remain part of the Council's commercial property portfolio. We are unable to provide any further comment at this time as this relates to confidential commercial matters."

Do you have a view? Feel free to write to Epsom and Ewell Times.

Noble housing intentions?

4 January 2024

Crest Nicholson and the Vistry Group have partnered for a "sustainable development" initiative near Noble Park in Epsom. They plan to submit a comprehensive planning application to **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** this Autumn. The proposal aims to construct around 90 new homes, with 40% allocated as affordable housing.

The project includes the creation of communal open spaces and green areas, featuring a community orchard and a children's play area. Noble Park allotments will remain untouched, highlighting a "commitment to preserving community assets". Additionally, plans include dedicated private parking facilities for allotment holders.

The developers have invited the local community to participate in shaping this initiative by providing input and ideas. Residents can offer feedback or seek more information through the 'Feedback and Contact' tab on the following unattributed website. http://nobleparkconsultation.com/

The project is located on 5.67 hectares of land to the east of the existing Noble Park development, at the intersection of West Park Road and Horton Lane, with vehicular access from West Park Road. While specific timelines depend on the planning process, construction may begin in 2025, contributing to family housing and affordable homes in the area. This initiative "aims to address housing shortages and bring positive change to the community".

Epsom and Ewell Times can confirm that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council will meet at 7.30pm on 24th October, to decide whether to "un-pause" progress on the Local Plan. The Plan that will establish the planning policy framework for where and how many houses may be built in the Borough in the future.

Related reports:

Drafting of Epsom and Ewell Local Plan "unpausing"?

Motion to pause Local Plan process

Council Grapples with Rising Cost of Homelessness

4 January 2024

In an ongoing challenge to manage rising homelessness-related costs, **Epsom & Ewell Borough Council** (EEBC) finds itself confronted with an impending financial strain exceeding their 2023/24 budget. This report sheds light on the concerted efforts made to mitigate the budgetary overruns and identifies available funding avenues to cover these increased expenditures.

The Community and Wellbeing Committee 10th October accepted the following recommendations:

1. Acknowledge the measures taken over the past 6-12 months to address homelessness.
2. Approve the utilization of the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) and homelessness grant reserves to meet the projected increase in expenses, thereby ensuring EEBC complies with its obligations under the Housing Act

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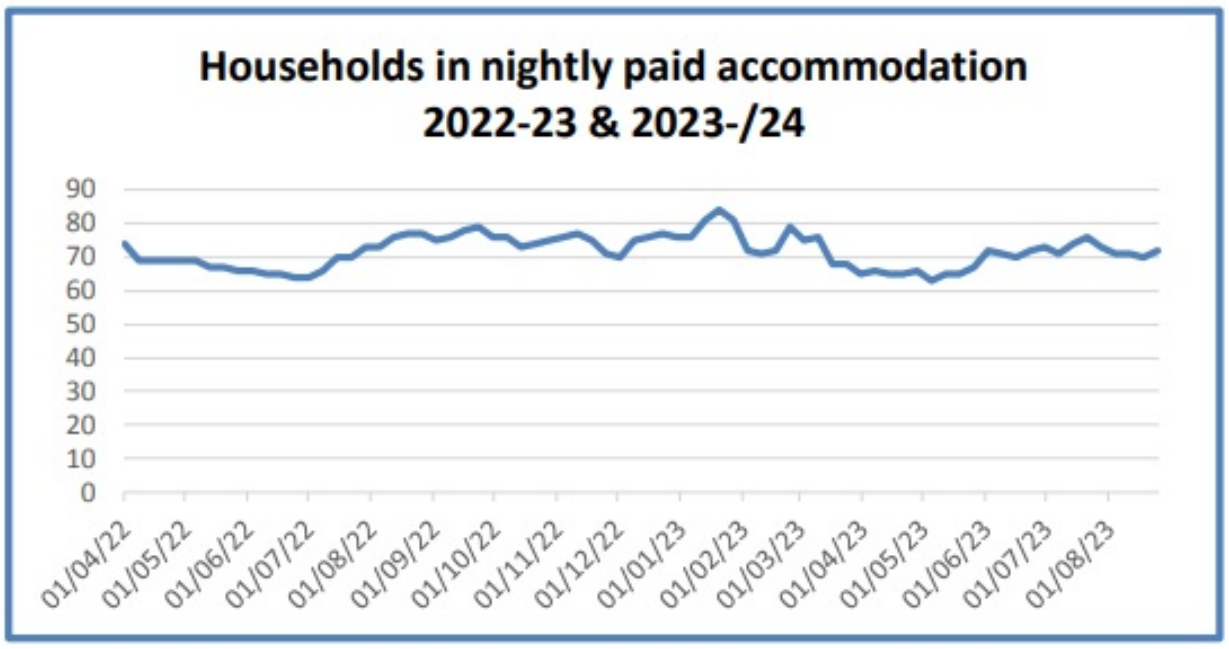
1996 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

3. Note that a comprehensive update will be presented at the Community & Wellbeing Committee in March 2024.

EEBC is bound by statutory duties outlined in the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Non-compliance could expose the council to legal challenges.



The Committee were advised of escalating expenditure: EEBC's budget is stretched thin due to mounting expenses for temporary accommodation in fulfilling their homelessness obligations. Costs for 2023/24 are poised to surpass £1.5 million, primarily owing to an increasing number of homelessness cases, a 15% surge in rental rates from accommodation providers, and a shortage of alternative housing options.

Officers have been operating in an increasingly demanding climate, with the cost-of-living crisis amplifying the complexity of issues presented by households in need of assistance.

The cost-of-living crisis, accompanied by rent hikes, has exacerbated housing supply issues, with heightened competition from other local authorities further straining the available housing stock.

The Homelessness Strategy & Action Plan 2022-27 was adopted in November 2022, outlining key objectives and actions. Progress has been made in early intervention and prevention.

Competition and energy cost increases have pushed up the cost of accommodating households in temporary arrangements, despite the team's adaptive procurement approach.

Officers occasionally resort to using Travelodge as accommodation due to a lack of alternatives, incurring a substantial cost of around £140 per night. The average net cost of nightly paid accommodation for small families has surged by over 18% compared to 2022/23, reaching approximately £23,500 annually.

EEBC introduced a Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme to lease properties from private landlords for temporary accommodation, offering significant cost savings compared to expensive options like Travelodge.

The challenges faced by the housing services teams are likely to persist in the coming year, and high numbers of households in temporary accommodation are expected to persist.

Economic uncertainties and factors such as reduced housing development and the closure of bridging accommodation for refugees will continue to exert pressure on housing services.

Monthly reporting to the Committee Chair and Vice Chair will provide ongoing updates on the situation, with a commitment to implement actions as per the Homelessness Strategy.

Promotion of the PSL scheme to landlords will be pursued, and collaboration with housing associations and partners to boost the supply of affordable housing will remain a priority.

In sum, EEBC is grappling with the burden of homelessness-related expenses, which, despite diligent efforts, continue to rise. The council faces the critical task of managing these costs to fulfill its legal obligations while seeking innovative solutions to address housing supply challenges in the community. The situation will be closely monitored, with continued engagement with stakeholders to identify viable solutions.

The recommendations were agreed by the committee.

Image: Evelyn Simak cc-by-sa/2.0

Housing Allocation Policy Undergoes Updates

4 January 2024

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In a bid to modernize the housing allocation process and enhance the efficiency of social housing distribution, the Council adopted a series of amendments to the Housing Allocation Policy and Choice Based Letting Scheme. These changes aim to align the policy with recent legislative updates, reinforce penalties for fraudulent activity, and refine financial thresholds for eligibility.

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge**, Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee (RA Ewell Village) introduced the item at its meeting on 10th October: “It’s over six years since this was last reviewed significantly, and the changes proposed to the policy are intended to introduce considerable more flexibility so that we can widen the range of people that we can assist through the scheme. So, the committee has been asked to review it and say whether they agree with the various changes that are being made”.

During the discussion Cllr Woodbridge asked: “How has the Domestic Abuse Act changed the way we have to implement our policy, and how is that reflected in the document before us tonight?” The Council Officer explained: “Our previous policy was compliant anyway, it just didn’t make a particular reference to The Domestic Abuse Act. We have exceptions within the allocation policy which allow us to look at each case on a case-by-case basis. However, the housing needs register is a waiting list and often it can’t address people who have an urgent need for rehousing, so often the more appropriate route for people who are at immediate risk of domestic abuse is to go through the housing options process. However, the policy is designed so we don’t put barriers up for those that do want to be on our housing needs register, so it doesn’t have a requirement to have lived in our borough and is flexible to take those needs into account.”

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford Ward) expressed her concern about the position of “care leavers” (persons who have been in care between the ages of 16 and 25 who lived in care for at least 13 weeks since their 14th birsthday) and asked that each such applicant for housing was considered flexibly and treated on a “case by case” basis. The officer responded that “At a practical level we would always treat each case on a “case by case basis””. She added that the care leaver policy was being looked at on a Surrey wide basis.

In December 2014, a joint Social and Strategy and Resources committee approved fundamental changes to the existing Housing Allocation Policy. The policy governs how housing needs are prioritized, Housing Needs Register applications are assessed, and social housing is allocated. Following extensive consultations with key stakeholders, the revised Housing Allocation Policy was formally endorsed and implemented in June 2015.

While the policy has effectively met its intended goals, certain aspects are now due for review to ensure its continued relevance and responsiveness to current challenges. Consequently, several adjustments to qualifying and non-qualifying criteria, along with administrative procedures, have been proposed to keep the policy up-to-date. The key changes include:

1. Fraud & False Information:
   Revisions to the qualifying criteria and penalties for applicants involved in fraudulent applications or false information. These changes will align with the ongoing efforts of Reigate and Banstead’s Fraud Investigation team.
2. Legislative Compliance:
   Ensuring the Housing Allocation Policy complies with evolving legislation, statutory guidance, and case law.
3. Alignment with Surrey-Wide Protocols:
   Adapting the policy to any adjustments in joint protocols implemented across Surrey.
4. Financial Qualifying Criteria:
   Reviewing the financial criteria for inclusion on the Housing Needs Register. The current thresholds, set in 2015, restrict single people or couples without dependent children with gross annual earnings of £25,000 or more and couples or single parents with dependent children with gross annual earnings of £50,000 or more.

Proposed Changes:

- Fraud & False Information: Strengthened criteria and penalties for applicants making fraudulent applications. Disqualification from the Housing Needs Register for two years for fraudulent applicants and five years for those convicted of fraud or deception.
- Legislative Compliance: Updates to reflect changes in legislation and statutory guidance affecting the Housing Allocation Policy.
- Alignment with Surrey-Wide Protocols: Incorporating changes introduced in the Surrey Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

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- Financial Qualifying Criteria: Adjusting the income thresholds, increasing the current £25,000 gross annual earnings for single people/couples without dependent children to £40,000, and the £50,000 threshold for couples/single parents with dependent children to £65,000.

These adjustments are backed by a recent benchmarking exercise across Surrey, which highlights the need to ensure a balanced mix of households reliant on welfare benefits and those employed, especially for one-bedroom properties. Additionally, the proposed income thresholds align with the income levels at which applicants would no longer qualify for welfare benefits or universal credit.

Furthermore, the changes aim to address the challenges faced by low-income households in private rental accommodation, who are often limited by the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, causing a substantial shortfall between LHA rates and median private sector rents.

The proposed adjustments are a comprehensive attempt to modernize the Housing Allocation Policy, making it more equitable, responsive, and reflective of the current housing landscape. The committee unanimously adopted the revised policy.

Improving housing improvements for the vulnerable

4 January 2024

10th October Epsom and Ewell Council's **Community and Wellbeing Committee** agreed a Revised Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy to Expand Support for Vulnerable Residents.

The item was introduced by committee Chair **Cllr. Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village). In response to updated central government guidelines, the local Council is poised to adopt a more flexible and proactive approach to assist a broader range of households through its revised Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy. The move comes as a result of increased funding for the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) program via the Better Care Fund. This additional funding has enabled the Council to harness the powers under the Regulatory Reform Order 2002 (RRO) to introduce a Discretionary Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy, aiming to provide support for vulnerable residents.

The existing policy has proven effective in the past but is now undergoing revision as the Council finds itself with a significant surplus of DFG funds, providing an opportunity to extend its assistance further. Notably, central government's guidance, released in March 2022, has directed the Council to utilize the discretionary powers within the RRO to meet the needs of disabled and vulnerable individuals in the community more comprehensively. This flexibility includes adaptations to means test requirements and grant caps, while also offering discretionary financial aid for purposes such as home safety and hospital discharge support.

The Council's objective is to ensure equitable and accessible financial support reaches a wide array of residents. To achieve this, a revised policy is being proposed to accommodate an increased number of vulnerable residents.

Background:

- The Council's responsibilities concerning financial assistance for repair and adaptations are regulated by the Housing Grants, Construction, and Regeneration Act 1996 and the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (RRO).
- The Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy was first introduced in 2018.
- The Council annually receives ringfenced central government funding for DFGs, totaling £785,282 in the last three years. Local authorities are encouraged to maximize the use of their discretionary powers under the RRO to respond to local needs, necessitating the formulation of a published policy.
- In the fiscal year 2022/23, the Home Improvement Agency collaborated with various organizations to enhance the promotion of their services and grants, leading to the completion of 43 DFGs worth £616,000 for a wide range of adaptations, including level access showers, stairlifts, ramps, and wheelchair accessible extensions. The handyperson service completed 241 jobs, addressing needs such as grab rails, minor repairs, and garden clearances.
- The integration of services between Housing, Social & Adult Care, and the National Health Service aims to support vulnerable households in remaining in their homes whenever possible.

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- Poor housing can be a significant barrier for vulnerable, elderly, and disabled individuals, contributing to immobility, social exclusion, ill health, and depression. Housing assistance policies can mitigate these challenges by enabling people to live independently in secure, well-maintained, and suitable housing.

Proposed Policy Changes:
The Council's revised policy includes several notable changes to better support residents:

- Broadened eligibility criteria, including the removal of means test requirements for prevention grants and the inclusion of council tax support as a passporting benefit to streamline access.
- A more flexible application process and forms.
- A new exceptions clause for individualized case handling.
- An increased maximum grant level to account for rising construction costs and complex needs.
- Assistance extended to those with terminal illnesses and dementia.
- Introduction of loans from the Parity Trust for cases requiring additional funds or where grant requirements aren't met.
- Accessible housing grants to meet the growing demand in the housing market for disabled individuals who are either homeless or in need of more suitable properties.
- Addition of a prevention grant to enhance health and safety in homes in alignment with the NHS and Social and Adult Care.

The Council's commitment to expanding its support through this revised policy reflects its dedication to fostering safer, more accessible housing options for vulnerable residents.

The revised policy was unanimously agreed by the committee.

Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

4 January 2024

A land scam, £3.5million spent and residents being "ignored" have come to a head as a district council finally looks set to call an end to its 6,000-home local plan.

As well as uneven development between the north and south of Tandridge, councillors raised concerns about the draft plan not looking enough at necessary infrastructure.

After a drawn-out process including hearings in public, the abandoned garden village planned for Godstone and terse public exchanges with the government's planning inspector, the council's leader declared the plan "dead".

A meeting of the district council's planning policy committee on Thursday (September 21) decided to ask the inspector for a final report, despite an additional bill of around £12,000, rather than withdrawing the plan.

Of the options in front of members, the council's leader said: "In either case, the plan is dead."

The inspector told the council in July he did not "see a route to soundness for the local plan", but at a meeting after that the council put forward options to find a way forward.

The local plan, which set out where and when homes will be built across the district until 2033, was submitted to government for examination in January 2019.

There was a change of administration in May 2021, when a minority administration of residents' associations took control of the council.

The current leader, Councillor Catherine Sayer (Residents' Alliance, Oxted North and Tandridge), said she thought the local plan system was "totally unfit for purpose".

With a government funding bid for works to improve junction 6 of the M25 failing, central to the plans for a new garden village, she said there was "a big question mark over why the planning inspector did not end the process at that point".

Cllr Sayer told the meeting: "In an attempt to avoid ending up with no plan at all and the threat that would mean to the green belt together with a huge waste of taxpayers' money, we tried to salvage something.

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"We proposed amendments and deleted the garden community and attempted to do whatever else the planning inspector had indicated might make the plan acceptable."

The leader also told the meeting it was "common knowledge" that some of the green belt land planned for the garden community had been part of a land scam where more than 350 small plots were sold on an investment basis.

She said: "Most of the owners are believed to reside in India and Pakistan. To enable the garden community to go ahead, it would have been likely that the council would have needed to use its compulsory purchase powers to assemble the land."

She said asking for a report from the inspector could "bring some kind of useful closure to what is such an unhappy and costly chapter for Tandridge District".

Councillor Jeremy Pursehouse (Independent, Warlingham East Chelsham & Farleigh) said he was "very sad to see the demise of the garden community" which he said balanced out planned development across the north and the south of district. He said: "We can't put everything in Warlingham and Caterham, it just doesn't work like that. It will just make people who are living in suburban areas further away from the green of the countryside, we have to share these things around."

He said the north of the district did not have the infrastructure for the kinds of development being looked at in the plan.

Councillor Mick Gillman (Residents' Alliance, Burstow, Horne & Outwood) said he lived in the south of the district, which did not have the railways of the north, and described the A22 as "a car park much of the time". He added: "It's driven by infrastructure, and you've got to put a lot of money into the infrastructure in the south to get it up to speed."

But he also highlighted his reasons he thought it was important to get a report from the inspector.
Cllr Gillman said the council owed it to residents to justify why more than £3.5m had been spent on "something that has failed". He added: "What's even more concerning to me is many of the reasons that the inspector flagged up were those that were flagged up by residents in the consultation process and they were ignored. And I think residents need to know that they did not get it wrong, and it was the organisation within the council that got it wrong."

The meeting unanimously agreed to ask the inspector for a report, rather than withdrawing the plan, and will recommend this to council. Full council will debate the next steps for the plan, its next scheduled meeting is on Thursday, October 19.

Photo: Catherine Sayer Tandridge District Council leader. Image credit Darren Pepe/Surrey Live.

Gove flexing his muscle on a Local Plan?

4 January 2024

A last-minute intervention from **Michael Gove** continued the uncertainty around the Surrey Borough Council of **Spelthorne**'s plan for 9,000 new homes. The **Surrey Heath MP** ordered the council not to pause its local plan, in a letter sent by the housing and planning minister, limiting Spelthorne's options at a crucial meeting.

After what the council's chief executive described as an urgent ministerial meeting at 3pm on Thursday (September 15), a letter was sent to the council's leader setting out Mr Gove's intentions.

An extraordinary meeting of the council on the same day was set to vote on the options to continue with the plan, keep it on pause, or withdraw it altogether. The plan has been on pause since councillors asked the government inspector for a hiatus in June, after hearings had started at the end of May.

The letter from MP **Rachael Maclean** stated Mr Gove had legal powers to intervene if necessary if he thought an authority was "failing or omitting to do anything it is necessary to do" regarding preparing, revising or adopting its local plan.

While the chamber was told voting to withdraw its plan, outlining where new homes will be built in the borough up to 2037, was no longer a lawful action, councillors ultimately voted to extend the pause on the plan.

They also voted to seek further legal advice to "confirm the validity of the minister's directive".

The council voted by 20 votes to 16 to extend the pause, pending the publication of changes to national policy, due this autumn.

The council's leader, Councillor **Joanne Sexton** (Independent Spelthorne Group, Ashford East) said the council would seek further clarification from Mr Gove on the reasons behind the direction. She added: "We will endeavour, in the name of democracy, that we will produce a plan benefiting the residents of Spelthorne by the government's deadline of June 2025."

Cllr Sexton said unresolved flood issues in Staines, a plan that delivered "beautiful places" and with the "communities at

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the heart of it" were some of the concerns and reasons behind the plan that would be made clear to the government.

The question of the cost to the council of seeking further legal advice was also raised. Councillor **Karen Howkins** (Conservative, Laleham and Shepperton Green) asked how much money further legal advice relating to the local plan would cost. She asked: "Haven't we spent enough on legal advice regarding the local plan, haven't we wasted enough money? Isn't it time that we stopped wasting money that we haven't got?"

Officers confirmed the cost of further legal advice should be "not more" than £2,000.

While other councillors raised the "cost to the local community" both of putting through the "wrong plan" or of further delays.

The current draft plan allocates more than 5,400 of the borough's 9,270 new homes to be built in Staines.

Councillor **Howard Williams** (Independent Spelthorne Group, Staines) said of the council's plans to pause its own house building projects indefinitely that it impacted around a third of the flats planned for Staines. The current plan did not protect the green belt, he said, did "nothing" to deliver affordable or social housing and included more than 5,000 flats be built where they were "likely to flood".

He asked the meeting: "If we stick to the current targets of building 9,000 flats, where are all the flats that can't now be built in Staines going to go instead? Sunbury, Stanwell, Ashford, Shepperton? They will all have to be built in other towns in the borough. So setting unrealistic targets for Staines does not protect other people's towns or the green belt. That is a fallacy."

Spelthorne's neediest lose out on housing

4 January 2024

"Those who need it most" will be the people who suffer most from a council's plans to abandon its home building projects, according to one councillor.

Spelthorne is a Surrey Borough and its main town is Staines-Upon-Thames. Epsom and Ewell Times occasionally publishes reports about other Surrey districts as they enlighten issues all Councils can face and contrast with experience in the Borough of Epsom and Ewell.

Rising interest rates adding £360million to the cost of developments, increased construction costs and reduced building heights have all contributed to the shelving of the council's projects.

It means **Spelthorne Borough Council** is likely to halt projects to provide affordable and social housing and homes for key workers in the borough, where there are nearly 4,000 people on the housing register.
The authority had plans for developments at Oast House and Thameside House in Staines, as well as at the White House in Ashford and Benwell House in Sunbury.

Those developments will now be stopped "to protect the council" from the increased costs.

Meeting documents show the council's group leaders had decided it was not appropriate for the council to "directly bear the risk and additional financial exposure" from increased borrowing to deliver the schemes.

Ashford North and Stanwell South Councillor Sean Beatty (Labour) said his ward was not only one of the poorest in the borough, but in the whole county. He described it as "extremely galling" that whether in the short, medium, or long term the people who would suffer would be those who needed housing.

Cllr Beatty told a meeting of the council's corporate policy and resources committee on Monday (September 11) that the only people that would build social housing would be the council. He added that in his experience "very, very rarely" would private providers build social housing. He told the meeting: "It really concerns me that the people in Spelthorne who need it the most, are the ones that are going to suffer the most."

The council will look at various options for the planned schemes, which could include selling the sites or progressing them with other providers. But councillors were warned that the less risk the council took on in each development, in handing over to a private developer, the less control they would have about how the final projects turned out.

Councillor Howard Williams (Independent Spelthorne Group, Staines) questioned how the council should approach the

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issue. He said: “I don’t think the residents of Staines would be very impressed if we sold the Oast House site to a developer only on the basis that they can shove 15-storey buildings in there and we walk away with the least cost to ourselves.”

Councillors heard it was unlikely to be a “one size fits all” approach, and each site would be looked at in detail, to have options presented to the committee and to council. But the authority’s chief accountant, Paul Taylor, gave a stark warning about the rising interest rates on government-backed loans, as well as the lower heights of projects going through the planning stages that he said had wiped £70million of revenue out. He told councillors: “We must take action now to protect the council.”

Related reports:

Spelthorne’s thorny property problems spelt out

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