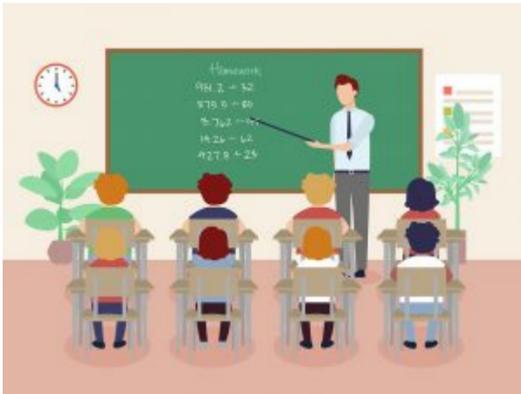


Surrey multiplies to subtract innumerate numbers

17 September 2024



Free, flexible Multiply courses are now available for Surrey residents who would like to improve their confidence using numbers.

Around half of the UK working age population don't have strong numeracy skills, or don't feel confident about working with numbers.

Now Surrey residents can do something about it without having to go back to the classroom, (unless you want to). Multiply courses are a diverse range of free, flexible courses that have been created to help plug the numeracy gap.

They come in many different shapes and sizes, so if classrooms aren't your thing, and you'd rather do some cooking or gardening, that's absolutely possible. Or if you need it to fit in around your work and home life, that's possible too, with flexible online courses available. There's a Multiply course to suit everyone - from those who just want to feel a bit more confident with numbers in their everyday life, to those who want to get a new qualification, get a better-paying job and further their career.

Multiply courses are funded by the UK government and delivered by a range of providers overseen by Surrey County Council. Courses range from a couple of hours online, to several weeks with in-person tutoring. With a total of 15 providers and over 35 courses available (with more being added soon), there's something to suit everyone.

Individuals can sign up for a Multiply course to suit their needs, and businesses can also nominate staff who would benefit from improving their numeracy skills. The full range of courses can be seen on the Surrey County Council website with many created to fill the needs of specific industries, such as construction, healthcare and early years.

Clare Curran, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member Children, Families, and Lifelong learning, said: "Multiply courses are another tool from our skills toolbox to help improve economic outcomes for residents and businesses in Surrey. Strong numeracy skills are essential to help residents reach their potential, and businesses whose workforces are number confident can boost productivity, increase profits, and improve employee retention.

"Supporting local people to improve their numeracy skills is not only beneficial at the individual level, but also good for our communities and our economy - leading to a better quality of life for all, ensuring no one is left behind."

Courses are starting now and will run until the end of March 2025. To qualify, learners must be based in Surrey, aged 19 or over, and not currently have a GCSE (or equivalent) in Maths.

Multiply courses can also be used by local businesses to upskill current employees, at no cost to either the learner or the business.

A full list of courses and start dates can be found on **the Surrey County Council website**.

Register your interest at <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/multiply>

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Village divide on Parade

17 September 2024



Plans to demolish and rebuild a shopping parade in Oxshott, has been met with controversy among locals, with some residents decrying it as a "monstrosity" that would be "entirely out of place in a quaint Surrey village."

Nearly 240 letters have been written to Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) with around 190 against and 134 supporting the application. Oxshott locals agree the "tired, old and ugly" Heath Building could do with upgrading but they have

opposing ideas about what the development should look like.

Built in the 1960s, the two-storey Heath Building is of a brick, modernist design with a flat roof. It currently hosts five operating retail units and five residential flats, three of which are occupied.

The application is seeking to replace the existing Heath Building parade with nine residential flats, four retail units with car parking and a gym. In redeveloping the site the applicant, Heath Buildings Ltd, hopes the “high quality buildings” will attract more footfall and “ensure the vitality and viability” of the High Street.

Locals support a development of sorts, but not at any cost. Residents argued the size of the building is “ridiculous” and would completely dominate and destroy the street scene, and look “entirely out of place in a quaint Surrey village”.

Comparing the development to the equivalent of a “Marriott Hotel being ‘dumped’ in our high street”, one man argued the development will have a profound impact on neighbouring residents living “in the shadow of this monstrosity”.

But a resident who was in favour said: “Oxshott High Street is the heart of the village but the buildings are ‘tatty’. [This development] would enhance the high street.”

Council officers have recommended the proposal for refusal due to the height, bulk and the architectural design being “incongruous” with the character of the area. They added the style of the development would result in a “harmful” loss of privacy, create an “unneighbourly and overbearing impact” to other properties.

A previous application was refused in December 2023. EBC also rejected the application because it did not fully show it could secure private refuse collection for the residential units or that there would be no loss of biodiversity like trees.

Planning documents detail the applicant’s vision of a “traditional” building which reflects the “imposing and often neo-classical/Georgian style houses” in the area. Responding to the previous refusal of the scheme, the applicant has designed a ‘pitched roof’ slanting from the centre, to lower the overall height of the building.

The three-storey development is proposed to be two metres taller than other buildings on the high street. But the applicant said there would be “no harm” in introducing a “slightly taller building” on the high street as there was not a consistent level.

But people have still taken opposition, one resident said: “The Real Voice of Oxshott has spoken and it’s a ‘NO’”. Others have voiced persistent concerns around the height and overall bulk of the proposal. One resident criticised the plans as “excessive and overwhelming” with “little architectural merit”.

Concerns were also raised about losing trees around the retail parade, some with tree protection orders (TPOs) like the walnut tree.

Although the council’s tree officer made no initial objections to the scheme, a late submission by Midgarth Residents’ Association (MRA) found the proposed development would result in a detrimental impact on protected trees. This is because it is claimed that the building’s height would reduce growing space and harm the survival of the trees. Taking the report on board, officers have added the concerns around tree preservation as an additional reason for refusal.

Those supporting the plans argue the high street and the building is in “desperate” need for renovation and the investment will spur on economic and business opportunities in the village. A resident argued that “as one of the richest postcodes in the country”, the “quality” upgrade plans was exactly what the residents of Oxshott “should expect”.

Others say the building “needs to be updated” and they would rather have a company which has already invested in the community than an outside developer or a national chain. A resident claimed residents will “lose [the] high street” with all the independent shops if the application is not approved, as national retailers or large-scale development will take over.

Councillors debated the proposal at the south area planning sub-committee on September 11, but referred it to be decided at full planning committee later in the year.

A question of Surrey’s future budget

17 September 2024



Surrey County Council (SCC) are currently seeking feedback from residents on how the council uses its financial resources. These views will help inform the draft budget for the 2025/26 financial year.

Each year, the council is required to balance its budget so that spending does not exceed income from council tax, grants and other sources.

Cllr **David Lewis**, Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources, said: “Although Surrey’s finances are well managed, the council is still facing huge challenges that are affecting the local government sector and society more widely.

“Higher costs, reduced funding from central government, and rapidly rising demand have all increased the cost of

providing vital services to residents. As a result, the way in which we use our financial resources is becoming more constrained.

“Feedback from residents is essential in informing decision-making and making sure that the budget is spent on the right things.”

Most of the council’s budget is spent on looking after those people who need us most, through Adults Social Care and Children’s services.

A significant portion is also allocated to keeping people safe and preventing or responding to serious incidents, particularly across Surrey Fire & Rescue Service, Trading Standards, and environmental services.

The diagram below shows how the budget is allocated across all the services that the council provides for the 2024/25 financial year. The figures are based on the average Band D Council Tax per year of £1,758.60.



Some areas funded by specific grants are not reflected in these statistics.

Residents are encouraged to complete the consultation survey and have their say by Monday 30 September 2024. Responses are anonymous and the survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

Consultation feedback will inform a draft of the budget, which will be considered by the council’s Cabinet in November 2024. If the draft is agreed, SCC will consult further over the winter on proposals for balancing the budget in 2025/25. In February 2025, the council will then agree the budget for next year and the medium term financial strategy covering the next five years.

Would members of Epsom’s H band stump up?

17 September 2024



People living in homes in the top council band will be asked to help the community after plans to ask Band H homeowners to voluntarily pay into a council-run charity were approved. **Waverley Borough Council**’s executive committee launched the drive in the hope of encouraging people to support community projects.

Though a “voluntary tax” is a contradiction in terms, is it a good idea for Epsom and Ewell Borough Council? Plenty of H band properties in the Borough and plenty of urgent causes for the Council to support locally? Let us know your views. Epsom and Ewell Times.

The Voluntary Council Tax Initiative is based on a similar scheme running in Westminster Council which brings in an additional £300,000 each year to the London borough. Council’s have to provide certain services by law but community projects such as leisure centres, parks, mobility buses and homeless schemes are considered to fall outside that bracket and are under increased pressure from budget cutbacks.

Waverley Borough Council hopes the new voluntary scheme will help save deeply important resident services and will now

ask Band H rate payers first, if they back the idea, and second, for input into which community groups to support. The money, the council made clear, is not for potholes or street lighting.

Councillor **Tony Fairclough**, deputy leader of the council, said that Westminster talked about support for the homeless and that any money Waverley raised would likely follow suit. He added: "The first and most important thing is that this will be a voluntary scheme and indeed that is one of the key points of the consultation.

"It will invite residents of Band H properties to make a voluntary contribution to local projects or the provision of local services. We will consult with the residents of those Band H properties to ascertain whether they are minded to support this scheme and assuming that they are, which type of projects or services should be supported by the revenues generated from it.

"This is a concept that has proved to be very successful in Westminster and in many ways, in my opinion, it actually addresses a slight flaw in government policy, namely that council tax bands are probably a bit too limited. Going out and speaking to Band H homeowners, this is an ideal opportunity for us to, on a voluntary basis, secure revenue for the sort of projects that this council is minded to do."

The smallest homes, those in Band A, pay about £1,500 a year in council tax, while those in the very largest homes (Band H) pay between £4,500 to £4,900. The criteria was set in 1991 and has not been updated since, leading to some to criticise the system as being regressive in nature. Councillors during the meeting on Wednesday, September 3 suggested the voluntary contribution could help redress any imbalance.

Westminster has used the money to fund youth services, tackling rough sleeping and helping those who were lonely and isolated, Cllr **Liz Townsend**, portfolio holder for planning said. She added: "We're all hearing about the black hole in Government, the £22billion black hole, so we are fairly pessimistic about the amount of money that local government perhaps will attract from central government. So we do have to be innovative in the ways we raise additional funds for discretionary services."

Cllr **Kika Mirylees** said: "People must realise that if they are putting this money in, it's not going to go to potholes and things like that. It will go to the benefit of the community. It's not going to be there for your trees or hedges to be trimmed. It's really there to benefit people who are in need of support and it's much more to do with homelessness, because it would be nice for the people to have a home who don't have one."

Image: Jacob Jordaens - Rich man giving to the poor.

Walking the talk on Epsom Downs

17 September 2024



On 10th September, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council hosted a Walk & Talk event at Epsom Downs Racecourse to mark World Suicide Prevention Day. Over 65 people, including residents and representatives from voluntary and statutory organisations, joined this insightful, moving and inspirational event, developed and delivered as part of the council's Suicide Prevention Action Plan, produced in January 2024.

Chris Waller, founder of We Power On, led the walk around Epsom Downs. **Dale Millar** MBE from the Samaritans opened the second part of the evening talking about skills used in conversation and the impactful nature that this can have. **Joe Stroud** from End Stigma Surrey talked about the negative impact that silence can have and how we, as a community, can stand together to break the chains of stigma around mental health. And finally, Chris shared his own experiences including the importance of being able to talk openly. Cllr **Clive Woodbridge**, the Chair of the Council's Community and Wellbeing Committee, also joined him to discuss his journey from crisis to hope.

Local scribe, **Annalees Lim**, designed boards and captured key messages at the event. These boards will be shown at locations around the borough, starting at the Epsom Downs Racecourse and finishing at the Epsom Picturehouse around 10th October to coincide with Mental Health Awareness Day. More information to follow.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee said: "I'm proud that through our Suicide Prevention Action Plan, we've been able to provide a platform for residents and organisations to come together and have conversations about mental health and suicide, and also raise awareness of where support and resources can be found for those suffering from mental health issues or directly impacted by the loss of someone to suicide.

A huge thank you to We Power On, Epsom Downs Racecourse, End Stigma Surrey, the Samaritans and to the scribe who captured messages at the event. Thanks also to everyone who volunteered their time at the event. Without the support of all the volunteers and supporting organisations, this event would not have been possible. We look forward to continuing

building on these relationships for the benefit of those who need our help the most.

As Chris himself said, “there is hope, and there is help out there”.

Funding was allocated by the council from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to We Power On to help residents access support in the borough. Chris, founder of the organisation, led the walk for adults aged 18 and above.

For more information on some of the mental health support and resources available across Epsom & Ewell - <https://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/resources-support>.

What are the solutions to Epsom’s homeless crisis?

17 September 2024



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, like many local authorities across England, is grappling with a growing homelessness crisis, as highlighted in a recent press release. [Click here for full press release]. The council, which is governed by the **Residents Associations** (RA), has laid out the stark realities of the situation, detailing the pressures it faces and the steps it is taking to address the problem. This has sparked responses from various political parties, local campaign groups, and concerned residents, each presenting their own perspective on how best to tackle the issue.

The council’s press release reveals alarming statistics, positioning Epsom & Ewell among the top seven boroughs outside of London with the highest number pro rata of homeless households in temporary accommodation. With more than £1.6 million spent on nightly paid accommodation last year, and many families placed outside the borough, the human and financial costs are escalating. Councillor **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Stoneleigh) Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Residents Association, highlighted the “enormous human impact” of this crisis, pointing out the disruption to education and the health challenges faced by those in temporary accommodation.

Councillor **Neil Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, echoed these sentiments, stating, “The vast majority of homeless households are those who cannot afford suitable accommodation,” and he pointed to the council’s Homelessness Strategy as a key tool in mitigating the crisis. The council’s initiatives include a Rent Deposit Scheme, a Private Sector Leasing Scheme, and efforts to bring empty properties back into use. However, both Cllr Dalton and Cllr Woodbridge acknowledge that these measures are only partial solutions, and significant action is needed to achieve a sustainable resolution.

Opposition Parties Call for Central Government Support

In response to the council’s press release, opposition parties have voiced their concerns and offered their own solutions. Liberal Democrat Councillor **Alison Kelly** (College) criticised the council’s approach as “sticking plaster solutions,” emphasizing the need for central government to provide financial incentives for social housing development, particularly on brownfield sites. She pointed out that increasing local housing allowances would provide immediate relief for those struggling to afford rent, arguing that this would reduce the number of families pushed into temporary accommodation.

Cllr Kelly’s comments reflect a broader call for government intervention. “The rental increases and the continuing cost of living crisis mean many can’t keep a roof over their head without going into debt,” she said, urging the government to address these systemic issues to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Green Belt Protection vs. Housing Need

A significant debate centres around the use of green belt land for housing. The campaigning group **Epsom Green Belt’s** spokesperson **Katherine Alexander** criticised the council for failing to plan adequately for affordable housing, accusing it of prioritising expensive developments over genuinely affordable homes. They advocate for using brownfield sites to provide low-cost housing, arguing that this would meet local needs without sacrificing green spaces.

“Destroying our valuable Green Belt without providing truly affordable housing would be unforgivable,” she said, pointing to the council’s own evidence that identified the high quality of the green belt land. She called for creative use of identified brownfield sites, such as the Town Hall site and former gas works area, to accommodate affordable housing.

Conservative Councillors Criticise Council’s Approach

Conservative Councillors for Horton, **Bernie Muir** and **Kieran Persand**, also weighed in, accusing the council of systemic failures. Cllr Muir argued that the council’s focus on green belt development was a “lazy and short-termist approach,” and that the council had not adequately explored the potential of brownfield sites. “I completely accept that we need social and affordable housing,” said Muir, “but the council is opting for the easy option rather than the optimal solution.”

Cllr Persand highlighted what he saw as a lack of proper investigation into alternative development strategies, including multi-use and multi-purpose sites. He suggested that large-scale developments, common in other towns, could meet housing needs while also providing economic benefits, such as increased footfall for local businesses and opportunities for local graduates.

Labour Councillor Demands Immediate Action on Social Housing

Labour Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Court) was sharply critical of the Residents Associations' handling of the housing crisis, "As the Residents Association boast they have had control of the council for over 80 years, it is absolutely astonishing that they have put out a press notice highlighting their own failures on housing and homelessness." She added "When it comes to supporting homeless people, sending them to temporary accommodation away from friends, family and schools is highly damaging and the council is boasting about placing families in the private rented housing that it says itself is "expensive and insecure"."

Cllr Chinn called for the Town Hall site [see Epsom and Ewell Times report [HERE](#) on Town Hall development] to be used for social housing, insisting that the council should ensure 40% of any new homes built there are for social rent. She pointed to the successful development of mixed affordable and social housing in Hollymoor Lane as a model to replicate, advocating for an immediate start on building more council houses.

"The council needs strong leadership and a Community and Wellbeing committee that has a laser focus on housing and homelessness," she stated, calling for more resources for the housing team to manage the increasing demands placed on them.

Public Sentiment Reflects Diverse Concerns

Residents also voiced their opinions, questioning how Epsom & Ewell ended up among the worst boroughs for homelessness. Some suggested that the borough might be seen as a "soft touch" for homelessness registrations, while others pointed out that the affordability criteria used for new housing developments do not realistically address the needs of those facing homelessness. "A 20% discount on a £750k home on Green Belt does not help with homelessness," said one informant, advocating for lower-cost housing solutions on brownfield land.

The Path Forward

The council's press release and the responses it has provoked highlight the complexity of the housing crisis in Epsom & Ewell. While the council has implemented a range of initiatives, there is a clear consensus that more needs to be done, both locally and at the national level. The debate over green belt versus brownfield development, the call for greater government support, and the need for genuinely affordable housing options are central to finding a sustainable solution.

As Councillor Woodbridge remarked, "This is a situation which requires significant action to bring about a long-term and sustainable solution." With various stakeholders advocating different approaches, the challenge for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will be to find a balance that addresses the immediate needs of homeless residents while planning for a future that includes both affordable housing and the preservation of the borough's natural environment.

Related reports:

[Epsom and Ewell Press Release on Homelessness](#)

[Stoneleigh library flats for homeless](#)

[Council Grapples with Rising Cost of Homelessness](#)

[Do good intentions square with homeless savings?](#)

[Council targeting the homeless](#)

[Image - Street View Google and added persons with suitcases at Epsom's Travelodge \(frequently used by Epsom and Ewell Council for temporary accommodation for the homeless\)](#)

Surrey Business Leaders Forum re-booted

17 September 2024



Businesses across Surrey now have a much greater voice in guiding the growth of the county's economy thanks to the relaunched and revitalised Surrey Business Leaders Forum.

Just weeks after the government handed Surrey County Council greater strategic powers to support economic development across the county, steps have been taken to ensure the private sector has a stronger voice and is right at the heart of local decision-making.

The Surrey Business Leaders Forum brings together close to 40 individuals representing a diverse range of businesses – from SMEs to Surrey-based multinationals, and including businesses from Surrey’s priority sectors alongside employer representative bodies.

The Forum will be a driving force to help raise awareness of local business and economic needs and act as a local business champion to ensure businesses have a voice in decision-making that impacts the local economy. Acting as an independent advisory group, the Forum will ensure businesses can input, challenge, and guide the Council’s approach to growing the economy.

The revamped forum met for the first time in May, and this week took part in a workshop to support the development of a new economic strategy for Surrey.

Matt Furniss, the Council’s Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth, said: *“Surrey has a fantastic economic story to tell, with more than 110,000 businesses generating over £50 billion to the UK economy.*

We know there is more that we can do to work with our private sector to deliver real benefits to our residents and communities, so we’ve taken steps to move quickly to make the most of the new powers from government, including creating Business Surrey, which provides free and accessible support to all Surrey businesses.

“Ensuring businesses are at the heart of our decision-making process can only strengthen that approach. I look forward to working with businesses to deliver on our priority to grow Surrey’s economy in a sustainable way, while ensuring no one is left behind.”

Chris Hurren, the Chair of the Business Leaders Forum and partner at RSM UK, a leading provider of audit, tax and consulting services, said: *“The Surrey Business Leaders Forum brings together an exciting and diverse group of local business leaders who want to be a driving force in shaping Surrey’s economic future and be a voice for all businesses in Surrey.*

“Their knowledge and experiences from the private sector will play a key role in helping shape local decision-making.”

The Council took the role as Surrey’s strategic economic leader in April this year, a role that was previously held by the county’s two Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Enterprise M3 and Coast to Capital.

The change has seen the council positioned well to lead on an enhanced, county-wide oversight and delivery role in driving sustainable economic growth across the county, a role which Surrey County Council wants to translate into actual economic benefits for residents and businesses.

It has absorbed formal responsibilities to deliver business support through the new Surrey-wide Growth Hub and deliver government-funded programmes focused on skills.

This new offer is presented via the Council’s Business Surrey service, which acts as a single gateway for all Surrey businesses to access support and advice. For access to all Business Surrey’s support and advice visit the Business Surrey website.

Related reports:

Epsom’s leader welcomes more power for Surrey County Council

Surrey County Council on the level.

Mixed reaction to Hunt’s budget in Surrey

Epsom and Ewell Press Release on Homelessness

17 September 2024

Media Release: Housing Pressures and Homelessness: How Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is Tackling a National Issue

Insufficient housing levels, particularly affordable housing, is a national issue affecting individuals and families up and down the country and Epsom & Ewell is no exception.

The Government recently released their 2023 statutory homelessness figures, revealing a 12% increase nationwide in the number of households in temporary accommodation, with the figure now standing at over 112,000. The number of households with children in temporary accommodation rose even more sharply by 15%, now totalling 74,530 households.

As Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Residents Association (Majority Group) and Housing Spokesperson for the District Councils’ Network, recently said in a letter about the homelessness crisis sent to the Deputy Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP:

“The human impact of this crisis is enormous. Families in temporary accommodation face huge challenges including disrupted education, health issues, and difficulty holding down a job. Homelessness undermines people’s lives and life chances.”

There are many factors that contribute to this nationwide problem; the lack of affordable housing, high rental rates, the ongoing cost of living crisis; and higher interest rates and mortgage costs to name a few.

Epsom & Ewell has proportionately one of the highest numbers of homeless households living in temporary accommodation in England and is in the top seven boroughs outside of London.

In Epsom & Ewell we face the additional challenge of the South East's very high housing costs, coupled with a severe shortage of housing. Affordable housing options in the borough are severely limited, partly due to the low level of affordable housing development in recent years. There is also only a small stock of private rented properties available which are in very high demand.

So as a borough, we urgently need more housing of all types including, but not limited to, affordable housing. Every house fulfils a need that makes other housing available, improves supply and demand, and lowers costs.

The rising cost of temporary accommodation

We don't have enough temporary accommodation in the borough to meet the large rises in demand we've seen over the last few years, so we often need to place people in nightly paid accommodation outside the borough. This can impact the household's wellbeing and is very expensive: Epsom & Ewell Borough Council spent £1,665,493 on nightly paid accommodation in 2023/24¹.

At present, we have 160 homeless households in temporary accommodation in the borough and more than 90 homeless households in nightly paid accommodation outside of the borough. Many of these families may have to wait more than three years before temporary accommodation in the borough becomes available, and even longer before a permanent housing solution can be found for them.

Councillor Woodbridge, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, Epsom & Ewell, said: "The vast majority of homeless households are those who cannot afford suitable accommodation. Perhaps they are sofa surfing or living with family in overcrowded households.

43% of homelessness is due to eviction from a private rented tenancy, with a further 24% people experiencing homelessness after living with family or friends who are no longer willing or able to accommodate them. There is also a significant percentage of households fleeing violence."

Epsom & Ewell's very low supply of social rented housing is in high demand. Fewer than 90 social housing properties become available each year against about 1,300 households who are on the housing register.

The average waiting time for applicants with a high housing need² is between 18 months and more than a decade, depending on the size of the property required. Those in lower housing need bandings have little or no prospect of being offered social housing.

The only alternative to social housing is private rented accommodation, which is very expensive - rising to an average of £1,630 in June 2024, an annual increase of 10.7% (the rise in the South East over the year was 8.2%)³.

"The housing team at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council undertake a huge range of actions and activities to mitigate and help solve the many challenges, as set out in the council's Homelessness Strategy. Without the incredible work being done by this team, the situation would be much worse." - Councillor Woodbridge, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee.

Initiatives that Epsom & Ewell Borough Council undertake to prevent homelessness include:

- Prevention focus - liaising with family and friends of people at risk of homelessness, negotiating with private rent sector landlords on their behalf, and assisting with deposits.
- Private Sector Leasing (PSL) Scheme - the council leases a property for between three and five years from a private landlord for use as temporary accommodation: Epsom & Ewell Borough Council calls on landlords to sign up to their Private Sector Leasing Scheme | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (epsom-ewell.gov.uk)
- Rent Deposit Scheme: the council is able to support residents with rental deposits that would otherwise be unaffordable, to help secure accommodation.
- The borough's Local Plan, if approved, will bring much-needed development to the borough to help ease the pressure, costs and demand for housing. This includes a policy to increase affordable housing delivery on all eligible sites.
- Working with partners to increase local temporary accommodation options including utilising any Council owned sites and properties.
- Lobbying government in partnership with other local authorities, via the District Council Network (DCN) - recently, this has resulted in the Local Housing Allowance being increased, having not previously seen any increase since 2019.
- Working in partnership with landlords to bring empty properties back into use.
- Downsizing households in social housing to free up larger accommodation.
- Challenging developers to provide much needed affordable housing on eligible development sites.
- Working in partnership with Registered Providers to increase affordable housing.

Development of affordable housing

There are limited sites in the borough to develop affordable housing due to the size of the borough, the existence of the green belt and the cost of redeveloping brownfield sites.

Furthermore, the current National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that smaller sites (fewer than 11 homes) are

exempt from providing an affordable housing contribution, and commercial to residential 'permitted development' sites are not required to provide affordable housing either.

Councillor Woodbridge, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, said: "As a council, we are working hard to ensure that local people have a suitable home to live in. This is crucial for the wellbeing of our residents – a home is not just a physical space to live safely and comfortably. A home provides roots, identity, a sense of belonging and a place of emotional wellbeing.

We also want to be able to reduce the very high expenditure that is currently required to manage the housing crisis in the borough, so that we can continue to invest in, develop and protect the many other services that the council offers its residents. The many actions we are taking will help to ease the crisis for some, but this is a situation which requires significant action to bring about a long-term and sustainable solution."

Case Study: Mr K

Mr K⁴, a self-employed professional and single father of two young children, had been renting privately for a number of years.

His rent was already £295 per calendar month (pcm) over the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate when he learnt that the landlord wanted to increase his rent by a further £200 pcm. Mr K could not afford to pay this increase and the landlord served an 's21 no fault' eviction notice.

The average market rent for a 2-bedroom property in Epsom is £1,720 pcm, however the LHA rate is £1,200 pcm. The LHA rate is the maximum rent that is used to calculate how much Housing Benefit or Universal Credit someone is entitled to. Anything over the LHA will not be considered, and the shortfall will have to be paid by the tenant, in addition to their usual rent liability.

Mr K was unable to find alternative affordable accommodation as letting agents wanted prospective tenants to have either:

- a minimal annual income of at least 30 times the monthly rent
- a guarantor who earns 36 to 40 times the monthly rent,
- or pay 6 month's rent in advance (even harder for Mr K as he was self-employed).

In addition, there were very few properties on the market and a lot of competition for them, with some properties going to sealed bids.

When the s21 notice expired Mr K felt he had no option but to approach the council as homeless. He was not previously known to the council and is an example of the increasing number of residents who are now unable to resolve their own housing problems and are becoming more reliant on the council for emergency homeless assistance.

When Mr K became homeless, the council provided self-contained temporary accommodation in the Croydon area. However, one of Mr K's children has special educational needs, and they were struggling being placed out of borough, with childcare, access to schools, family support and specialised support services. This was the only accommodation available to the council at the time.

After a number of months in temporary accommodation in Croydon, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Move-On Officer was able to find Mr K to find a privately rented 2-bedroom flat in Epsom and helped Mr K secure it by utilising the council's Rent Deposit Scheme.

Ends

Editors Notes

¹ This was due to a number of factors: the consistently high number of households approaching as homelessness, a 15% increase in rental costs by our accommodation providers and a lack of alternative accommodation options. The average net cost of nightly paid accommodation for a small family is about £23,000 a year, nearly 20% higher than it was in 2022/23. For those families who require three-bedroom or larger accommodation, the cost is £27,900 per year – we currently have 27 of these families in our borough.

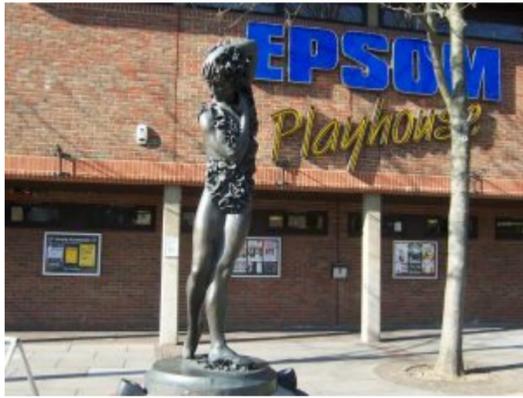
² High housing need includes issues such as: their current accommodation lacks basic facilities, doesn't have enough bedrooms, they are experiencing homelessness, or they have high medical needs.

³ Office of National Statistics, 17 July 2024.

⁴ In order to protect our resident's anonymity, we have changed some of the details of this case study and amalgamated details from more than one person. The case study remains a fair and accurate representation.

Epsom Playhouse gets a 40 year uplift

17 September 2024



Epsom Playhouse opened in 1984 as part of the development of The Ashley Centre and since opening has hosted a wide and varied programme of events featuring both professional and community productions. Highlights including The Royal Pihamonic Orchestra, Stephane Grappelli, Kenny Ball and his Jazzmen, the James Last Orchestra, Instant Sunshine, Jack Dee, Harry Hill and many many more.

At the beginning the Council head hunted **Graham Stansfield** (deceased 2018) for his contacts in the entertainment world which helped establish the Playhouse's reputation early on. Then all the theatre seats could concertina into the back wall, opening the space for balls and exhibitions. Expensive to maintain and service these seats were replaced by the comfortable fixed seating that remains today.

The Playhouse is home to a variety of local amateur ensembles including the Epsom Sympony Orchestra and the Epsom Players.

The former "members bar" or "upstairs area" has been defunct for many years and is getting a long overdue facelift and repurposing. It will become available for private hire for functions.

A spokesperson for EEBC said "We are currently working on improvements to Epsom Playhouse using an allocation of monies from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

One of the first areas for development is the bar on the ground floor. Soon, this will split into two - there will be one bar for bottled drinks and one area for draught - alleviating some of the queues that can happen at busy times. The ground floor bar will also benefit aesthetically from a new artistic mural, depicting singer and actress, Evelyn Dove. As well as this, there are also plans to add a new platform lift to aid accessibility to the upstairs area, which will itself be transformed with a mezzanine overlooking the foyer, improved seating, new flooring, another artistic mural and a refurbished bar area."

Speaking of the upcoming plans to develop facilities, Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee said, "Epsom Playhouse is a wonderful entertainment venue for the borough, and I am delighted that it is now benefitting from a much-needed uplift, which will help it to reach its full potential as a place for creatives to gather, perform and spectate!"

Epsom Playhouse's programme of events and successes are under the management of **Elaine Teague**.

UK SPF funds were allocated to help places around the country deliver enhanced outcomes, in recognition that even affluent areas contain pockets of deprivation and need assistance.

The main Auditorium seats 450 and plays host to major leading theatrical companies, including opera, dance, drama, comedy, light entertainment, variety, popular children's shows and more.

The Myers Studio within the Playhouse seats up to 80 and is used as a regular venue for professional productions, and community events. Both the Auditorium and the Myers Studio are available for both corporate hire and private hire.

For more information visit www.epsomplayhouse.co.uk

UK library cuts a concern for Epsom & Ewell?

17 September 2024



With 132 libraries closing permanently between 2016-2023 in England, there are growing concerns of further actions from local councils to make savings at the expense of public libraries. Should Epsom & Ewell be concerned?

Since 2016, the UK has witnessed a net loss of 185 public libraries from Council's statutory services. In total 132 libraries were permanently closed in England, with a further 29 expected to follow suit in 2024.

Former Children's Laureate, **Michael Rosen** has expressed great concern, stating "Every time I hear of a library being closed I find it absolutely horrifying... this seems to be like a decimation of our cultural entitlement."

Permanent closures are not the only growing worry surrounding UK libraries. Libraries Connected Chief Executive **Isobel Hunter** MBE acknowledged that "it is also a gradual reduction in opening hours, staff numbers and operating budgets that can leave libraries unable to meet the needs of their communities".

A government spokesperson responded "We recognise the pressures [libraries] face, and are committed to giving stability back to local councils so services such as these can best meet the needs of their communities."

How have libraries in Surrey and Epsom & Ewell fared since 2016?

Surrey:

Unlike several local councils, the Surrey County Council has not permanently closed any libraries since 2016. All 52 libraries are still running, 42 of which are council-run with the other 10 being community partnerships.

The Surrey County Council's 2024/25 budget indicates that they intend to enable libraries to meet the changing needs of communities while also ensuring library assets are fit and sustainable for the future.

One change Surrey has seen however is that 29 libraries are now operating with reduced hours.

Epsom & Ewell:

Of the 4 libraries in Epsom & Ewell, two are council-run (Epsom library and Ewell library). Between 2016-2023, both have been subject to the reduction of operating hours, with the council-run libraries reducing their open hours by 4.5 hours per week.

Despite the concerns of closures elsewhere, Surrey County Council is investing in several of its libraries, with Epsom library included.

A £23.2million investment for the transformation of Surrey libraries was approved by the Surrey County Council earlier this year, aiming to modernise services and create flexible spaces. Epsom, alongside Woking and Redhill, will see the creation of flagship facilities, including;

- Flexible meeting rooms
- Moveable partitions/walls to create workspaces
- Meeting pods
- New furniture
- A fully flexible layout

Epsom will additionally have 'super access technology' to allow access to library services outside its opening hours (during "super access hours"). This intends to resolve the reduction of opening hours by allowing people to use the library facilities even if no staff are present. The system has a library card and pin code access point to enter the building, and self scan kiosks to check books in/out.

With works already starting, as of the 5th of August 2024, Surrey County Council expects the final completion day to be in February 2025.

Despite this investment, Surrey County Council have outlined that libraries income pressures will continue in 2024/25, as outlined in their 2024/25 Budget & Medium-Term Financial Strategy to 2028/29.

Reliance on volunteer work:

1 of the 10 community-run libraries in Surrey is the Stoneleigh Community library, which has previously suffered from cuts. In 2011 the Surrey County Council voted to let go of most of the full time staff there, forcing the library to appeal for volunteers. After the judicial technical challenge and revised proposal, the volunteer group Friends of Stoneleigh library was formed in 2013 to reopen and run the library, and as of 2016 had around 70 volunteers.

Today the library still holds regular activities and special events, acting as a social hub for the Stoneleigh community. The Friends of Stoneleigh Library offers a variety of volunteer roles from administrative work to helping the running of events.

The other community partnership library in Epsom & Ewell is Ewell Court Library, listed alongside the Stoneleigh Community Library in initial plans to reduce spending in 2011/12. Open 4 days a week, the community library offers a wide array of services, with the help of its volunteers.

Time to press the gas on Epsom's Local Plan?

17 September 2024



As reported in the magazine Local Government Lawyer (19/08/24) several local councils in England are accelerating the development of their local plans in response to proposed amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that could substantially increase their housing targets and require reviews of green belt boundaries.

The proposed changes, detailed in a recent government consultation, include the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets and the possibility that a council's failure to meet its housing needs could justify revising green belt boundaries. Additionally, the consultation suggests alterations to the standard methodology for calculating housing need, which would likely result in most councils being required to plan for significantly more new homes.

Under the current proposals, local plans submitted for examination before June 2025 will be assessed under the existing NPPF rules. This has prompted councils like Winchester and Uttlesford to expedite their plans to avoid the more stringent requirements that could be imposed by the new NPPF.

In Winchester, the council's planning officer emphasized the urgency of submitting the local plan due to the potential increase in the housing need figure from 676 to 1,099 dwellings per annum. Similarly, Uttlesford District Council, which currently operates under one of the oldest local plans in England, is also moving quickly to submit its plan before the deadline.

Not all councils are in favor of the proposed changes. Wirral Council, for example, is set to hold an extraordinary meeting to express its concerns, particularly regarding the potential impact on its green belt. The council's draft plan focuses on brownfield development, but under the new proposals, it could be required to deliver an additional 14,000 homes, potentially affecting large areas of its green belt.

Councillors in Wirral have expressed strong opposition, with motions being tabled to challenge the proposed standard method for housing calculations, which they argue could undermine local regeneration efforts.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** if it had any plan to accelerate the Draft Local Plan process. Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (Residents Association - Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing & Planning Policy Committee responded: "Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is currently interrogating the documents for the Government's consultation on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and will prepare a response to the consultation to be submitted within the timeframe. We are dedicated to the development of a Local Plan that meets the needs of current and future residents of Epsom & Ewell. We will continue to consider the implications for the borough following the Government's consultation, when more detail becomes available."

Cllr **Julie Morris** (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group) (College Ward) said "Unfortunately the ruling Residents Association seems to have only one speed, DEAD SLOW, when it comes to the Local Plan which is already around 12 years late. It has never been a priority for them. We can't see any possibility of speeding things up now and recent progress is mostly unknown : there has been no open debate on the matter since last year. There is a meeting on 24th September which might throw some light on what's happening. Even councillors from the ruling group believe that an update on progress and potential changes to the Plan, in the run up to Regulation 19 and (hopefully) final adoption of the document, is long overdue."

A spokesperson for the campaigning group **Epsom Green Belt** commented on the Council position: "The NPPF proposals were published a month or so ago online. Without proposals it would not have been possible to launch the consultation, which runs until 24 Sept. The government's stated plan is to issue the new NPPF in Dec, applicable immediately.

Waiting until the changes are published and applicable would miss the current, and brief, window of opportunity to avoid their impact, which is why other (more enlightened and forward thinking) councils are choosing quickly to act. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council should be acting immediately to capture this opportunity."

The Epsom Green Belt spokesperson added: "The current NPPF, issued in Dec 2023, remains in force until or unless replaced by a new version. The Dec 2023 version does not require the release of Green Belt, specifically providing the option not to review any Green Belt boundaries. The Council therefore can retain the existing Green Belt boundaries and focus all housing on identified brownfield sites which, according to the Regulation 18 draft Local Plan can accommodate 3,700 dwellings. If they fail to take the opportunity to accelerate the Regulation 19 process, the target house building will exceed 14k."

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Walk on the Downs to feel Up.

17 September 2024



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is hosting a walk around Epsom Downs on 10th September to coincide with World Suicide Prevention Day. This event supports the council's Suicide Prevention Action Plan and aims to raise awareness of support and resources available to help those suffering from mental health issues or directly impacted by the loss of someone to suicide.

Funding has been allocated from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to **We Power On** to help residents access support in the borough. Chris, founder of the organisation, will lead the walk for adults aged 18 and above.

Immediately after the walk, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will host another event where Chris will talk about his story and the importance of having support available for people suffering from mental health problems. A scribe will create artwork which will then go on a 'tour' of the borough ending up at the **Epsom Picturehouse** on 10th October to coincide with Mental Health Awareness Day.

Residents will need to register to attend - 50 spaces are available for the walk and talk, and a further 50 spaces for those who only wish to attend the talk. Register [HERE](#)

End Stigma Surrey is also supporting this event, they are dedicated to raising awareness and reducing the stigma of mental health and are part of the council's wider Suicide Prevention Action Plan.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee said: "Mental health issues can have a devastating effect on sufferers and those close to them. No one should have to face mental health challenges alone and it's important as a council that we do all that we can to ensure vulnerable residents are informed, and can access, vital support when they need it.

Working with partners is an essential part of our Suicide Prevention Action Plan and I'd like to thank We Power On, End Stigma Surrey, and The Jockey Club for their support with this event.

I'd encourage anyone experiencing mental health issues to seek help. One life lost is too much."

Chris, founder of We Power On said: "I'm pleased to be able to support the council with its walk and talk. Walking helped me especially during Covid lockdown and I'm looking forward to leading the walk across Epsom Downs and also sharing my experiences in the following event. It's important for everybody to know that they're not alone, encourage conversations and keep highlighting where those people suffering from mental health issues can turn to for support."

Image credit: Marathon - License details

Epsom and Ewell Brace for Government Housing Targets

17 September 2024



In a significant policy shift, the newly elected Labour government has reintroduced mandatory housing targets, a move that is set to have far-reaching implications for communities across the UK, including Epsom and Ewell. The ambitious plan aims to deliver 1.5 million new homes over the next five years, following the scrapping of such targets by the previous Conservative government. This sweeping reform has sparked debate over its potential impact on local areas, particularly in relation to the use of green belt land.

Among the key changes introduced by the Labour government is the reinstatement of mandatory housing targets for local councils, which must now be met based on a recalculated assessment of local housing needs and affordability. This approach differs from previous national metrics, focusing on areas where housing is less affordable relative to income. Consequently, regions like Epsom and Ewell, where property prices are high, may face increased pressure to deliver more

housing.

Another controversial aspect of the policy is the introduction of the so-called “grey belt” land. This term refers to lower-quality land within the green belt that could be considered for development, in an effort to balance the need for new homes with the preservation of high-quality green spaces. Furthermore, the government has mandated that at least 50% of the homes built on grey belt land must be affordable, with a strong focus on social rent, addressing the UK’s chronic shortage of affordable housing.

For Epsom and Ewell, traditionally resistant to large-scale development, particularly within the green belt, these changes could mark a significant shift. The new mandatory targets might require the local council to approve more housing projects than previously anticipated, including the controversial use of grey belt land. This could lead to tensions with residents keen to maintain the area’s character, but it also presents an opportunity to address the local housing shortage, especially in terms of affordable homes.

The exact impact on Epsom and Ewell will depend on the specific targets assigned to the area and the availability and suitability of grey belt land for development. Local planning authorities with existing Local Plans may now be required to revise these plans to align with the new government mandates.

Tim Murphy of the local Council for the Protection of Rural England expressed his concerns, stating, “I think the new target is 821 new homes per annum. The figure is unattainable—we don’t have the required skills available in this country to build all the homes the Government wants, and there will be widespread opposition across large swathes of the country to the loss of so much countryside. I calculate that the Borough, with a current population of just over eighty thousand, will need to accommodate a further 32,000 people if this target is to be met over the eighteen-year period of the Local Plan.”

The **Epsom Green Belt Group** also voiced their concerns, highlighting the discrepancy between the current housing build rate and the new targets. A spokesperson for the group stated, “The current annual build rate (based on the 2007 Core Strategy) is 181 dwellings per annum. The current NPPF standard method figure (based on 2014 data) used in the regulation 18 draft Local Plan was 576 dpa. The new government proposals for a revision to the standard method would result in a target of 817 dpa. This is over four times the real need in the borough and almost triple the council’s current proposals.”

Cllr **Bernie Muir**, (Conservative) representing Epsom West Division and Horton Ward, acknowledged the need for more housing but raised concerns about the strategic approach. “I believe that we do need homes as we have a huge homeless issue in Epsom, plus we are desperately short of homes for key workers and those that support our care, retail, and hospitality sectors. However, the Local Plan will almost certainly end up building the wrong homes in the wrong place, primarily on Greenbelt land, with serious negative consequences,” she warned. Cllr Muir advocated for the development of town centre brownfield sites instead, arguing that this would provide the right homes in significant numbers, support the local economy, and improve the socio-economic prospects for the borough.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has responded to the recent reinstatement of mandatory housing targets by the UK Labour government, highlighting the challenges posed by its outdated Core Strategy. The current Core Strategy, adopted in 2007 and covering the period up to 2022, is now considered out of date, particularly as it predates the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) introduced in 2012.

In its statement, the Council pointed out that its historic housing completions, detailed annually in the Authority Monitoring Report (AMR), show a consistent shortfall when compared to the significantly higher requirements generated by the standard method for calculating housing needs. For the 2022/23 monitoring year, the Council reported a notable deficit against these figures.

The draft Local Plan, which was subject to public consultation earlier this year, proposed a supply-based housing requirement of 5,400 homes over the plan period, equating to 300 dwellings per annum. However, the Council acknowledged that this figure does not meet the actual housing need calculated using the standard method, which suggests a much higher need—576 dwellings per annum based on 2022 data, with projections potentially rising to 817 dwellings per annum under the government’s proposed revisions.

Councillor **Peter O’Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court Ward) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee said “The draft Local Plan (Regulation 18) that was subject to consultation in February and March 2023 proposed a housing requirement for the borough of at least 5,400 homes of the plan period (which equates to 300 dwellings per annum). This was a supply-based requirement and is not a reflection of need which is calculated using the standard method (see above).

The Draft Local Plan identified supply exceeding this minimum requirement to provide flexibility for non delivery of sites included in the supply.”

He added: “The government are currently consulting on Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system to which the council will be responding. The consultation is open to all and we would encourage those with an interest in planning to respond to the consultation.

One of the proposals is to amend the standard method for calculating housing needs. As part of the consultation, the government have published the housing need that would be generated using the revised method for all English Local Planning authorities and calculates the housing need for the borough to be 817 dwellings per annum.”

The consultation ends 24th September 2024 and the Council intends to take a report to its scheduled Licensing and Planning Policy Committee on that date which sets out the implications for the Borough and the Council’s suggested response to the consultation.

As the debate continues, residents and local officials in Epsom and Ewell will be closely watching how these new housing targets and policies unfold, weighing the potential benefits of increased housing against the risks to the borough’s

character and green spaces.

Image: License details Credit:David Wright

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Leatherhead town on the way up?

17 September 2024



Artistic impression of the arrival square (SE corner)

Leatherhead could become a "destination town" with an updated shopping arcade and cinema screens, according to regeneration plans. The future project could also see a 'new neighbourhood' created with up to 11-storey apartment block and townhouses in Bull Hill.

The Swan Centre has been earmarked to be the "catalyst to revitalise the town" of Leatherhead. A new leisure area is set to be the "heart" of the Surrey town with four new restaurants, bars and cafes.

Plans include 14 retail units, four cinema screens for leisure and a new central market square for events. Retaining stores like Sainsbury's, Boots, WHSmith and others is also being considered in the development proposals.

Demolishing Leret House, the former offices on Swan Street, is another key part of the proposal. Speaking at a webinar on July 30, project officers said they are looking to reuse as much of the fabric of the building as possible by retaining the concrete frame.

Locals could see apartment buildings up to 11 storeys popping up in the town centre, with houses ranging between three to four stories. Prospective plans for Bull Hill, the second part of the regeneration scheme, include apartment flats and townhouses, as well as parking facilities, offices, and a park. Officers are also looking at plans for a hotel with retail spaces on the ground floor.

Between one, two and three bedroom flats could be available in the new apartments, with the family houses being three to four bedrooms each. MVDC and Keir Property detail a mixture of open market and affordable homes for purchase and rent could be on the offer.

Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson said: "We appreciate that building heights are a sensitive matter, and this is why the sketches and layouts in the masterplan show illustrative heights only at this stage." The Cabinet Member for Projects stressed that "nothing has been decided" as the plans were still in the pre-application phase and "are likely to evolve based on [consultation] feedback".

A Kier Property officer said the project is "looking to get the right balance" of housing heights, so it can "sit comfortably in its environment." Upgrading the existing park in Bull Hill is also part of the initial proposals. Project officers said they wanted to make the park more accessible to people in Leatherhead by improving the play areas.

Launched on July 8 with five consultation events, people can give feedback to the prospective plans until September 26. Leigh Thomas, Group managing director, Kier Property said the consultation events so far had given him "much food for thought". He added the team were looking to adapt the plans "according to the needs of the local community".

MVDC and Keir Property has announced new consultation dates, including:

- Monday 19 August, 5:30pm to 7:30pm at St Mary's Church Hall, 10A The Ridgeway, Fetcham, Leatherhead KT22 9AZ
- Thursday 5 September, 5:30pm to 7:30pm at Ashted Peace Memorial Hall (Ralli Room), Woodfield Lane, Ashted KT21 2BE
- Wednesday 11 September, 5:30pm to 7:30pm at The Old Barn Hall Bookham (Main Hall), 55 Church Road, Great Bookham, Leatherhead KT23 3PQ

Keir Property and MVDC is looking at submitting a planning application in 2025 and, if approved, to start building by spring/summer 2026.

Artistic Impression Of The Arrival Square from North Street, south east corner. (Credit: Mole Valley District Council and Keir Property)

Social housing options boxed in

17 September 2024



Hundreds of people desperate for social housing will finally have homes to call their own after a seven storey block was approved – despite concerns it would blight historic views from Box Hill.

There are 640 names on Mole Valley District Council’s housing waiting list and the plans, approved on Wednesday, August 7, will add 126 new affordable homes to the borough’s stock.

Developers Clarion Housing Group will demolish the existing office and residential buildings at the vacant Regent House. The homes will be spread across two blocks ranging from three to seven with shops on the ground floor.

Officers told the meeting the council was behind its housing targets and the huge number of affordable housing on offer meant it was hard not to recommend the proposals.

Of the 640 names on the council’s housing waiting list, 218 households are currently waiting for two bed units and this development will accommodate 42 per cent of those with a further 10 per cent of the 316 households waiting for one-bed homes also set to benefit.

Councillor Monica Weller (Liberal Democrat: Bookham West) said: “I am particularly mindful of the horrendous number of people on the housing list.

“That really is quite shocking, 640 on the housing list. A lot of my time is spent with people who are actually living with a partner and children in their parents houses or homes or flats.

“The situation is actually dire and I think there are a lot of people who don’t actually realise that.

“A lot of people who I have contact with do not have cars, they can’t afford cars, and I think that with this site so close to Dorking, it is walkable.

She added: “I am particularly interested in the National Trust’s case about the view from Box Hill but seeing the proposal from the planning officer and the photographs I think there is a limit to how much we can protect these views weighed against the need for homes

Some spoke out against the plans and warned of a “slippery slope” of allowing too many tall buildings.

Andrew Holden speaking on behalf of a number of residents in Lincoln Road and the surrounding area said a development with fewer floors could still provide a large number of homes while minimising the impact on the area.

He told the meeting: “The view of Dorking from Box Hill and to visitors arriving by train will be of a significant cluster of multi-storey buildings thoroughly out of character with our historic market town.

“To avoid this slippery slope leading to irreversible harm, its important that councillors draw a clear line in the sand of what the scale of development is appropriate n this area..”

The plans were approved unanimously by planning committee members.

Image: New homes set for Dorking (credit Clarion Housing)

Redhill theatre gone to rack and ruin?

17 September 2024



There are currently no plans to reopen a much loved Surrey town centre theatre according to a new report.

The Harlequin Theatre in Redhill closed its doors in September 2023 after the discovery of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). Nearly one year on, surveys to establish the extent of the issue have not been completed and there is no indication of when any work may start, or the venue re-open.

Reigate and Banstead Council (RBC) will discuss the future of the theatre at a Strategies Meeting on Thursday (August 15).

RBC said: "We hoped it would be a temporary closure, but due to the extent of the RAAC identified so far and the complex structure of the building, we do not expect to be able to re-open the theatre in the foreseeable future."

In a report by council officers, it has been recommended to stop current Harlequin arts and cultural activities, including the December show and the pop-up in The Belfry shopping centre. The report also warned that "many loyal, hardworking staff" could face redundancy if the recommendation was adopted.

"I'm outraged," Cllr **Andrew Proudfoot** told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS). He said: "This is an absolutely essential hub for local arts and schools. This is the suggestion of a Conservative attack on community life."

Cllr Proudfoot put forward a motion at last month's council meeting to reaffirm RBC's commitment to the arts, secure an interim facility and develop a reopening plan for the theatre. The Green Party member said at the meeting that the theatre is home to many local organisations, providing cultural identity and nurturing young talent. They added there are no other similar facilities for large cultural events in the borough.

Locals have expressed their disappointment at the recommended decision and the ongoing uncertainty for the provision of arts and culture in the area. Some said they were "heartbroken" as the Harlequin Theatre gave them opportunities to develop in the creative arts.

RBC said it was "keen to keep access to the arts alive" while the building has been closed by delivering the successful Big Top Panto in Memorial Park and its regular 'Harlequin Outdoors' summer programme in Reigate's Castle Grounds.

Options tabled in the report include putting on the Christmas 2024 show and then making all Harlequin staff redundant in 2025, and working on a renewed opening in April next year. Costing the council an estimated overspend of £250-300k, it is the cheapest proposed option other than to stop all activity of the Harlequin theatre.

In a press statement, Cllr **Nadean Moses**, Executive Member for Sustainability and Leisure, said: "Our commitment to providing an arts and cultural offer in the medium and long-term remains strong." With no more events scheduled after the Outdoor Theatre closing on September 7, Cllr Moses said it can review the costs and benefits of the theatre as well as developing future options for the arts.

The council is looking at new venues such as a school or a cabaret-style performance space. Work is being done for a full business plan of the council's offering of creative arts to its residents for 2025.