

Surrey chief moves on after 6 years

4 January 2024



Surrey County Council Chief Executive Joanna Killian is to leave the council in March to take up the role of Chief Executive of the Local Government Association (LGA).

Joanna has been at Surrey for six years and has overseen dramatic transformation of the organisation, in the face of unprecedented challenges.

She will leave Surrey in a robust financial position, and with improved inspection ratings and peer reviews in almost all services.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said: *“Joanna’s approachable and caring nature, coupled with fierce ambition and sharp knowledge has guided this council through difficult change, tough choices, an unstable economic and political climate, as well as the small matter of a global pandemic - all challenges in which this council has come to the fore, and delivered better outcomes for the residents of Surrey.”*

“She has kept us true to our ambition that no one in Surrey should be left behind, and her leadership has had a hugely positive impact on this county as a place, and its people.”

Joanna Killian said: *“While I’m hugely excited and honoured to be taking up the Chief Executive role at the Local Government Association, it is with a heavy heart that I’m saying goodbye to Surrey.”*

“Surrey is a wonderful county, full of innovation and ambition, and the County Council reflects that, with a great workforce all dedicated to improving people’s lives.”

“Local government plays a vital role in communities up and down the UK, making a real difference every single day. It’s a sector I feel very privileged to work in, and I’m glad to be continuing that journey with the LGA, acting as a strong voice for councils with some big challenges ahead.”

Joanna will leave Surrey County Council on March 6th. Succession arrangements will be announced in due course. The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. Representing 315 councils across England and working with councils in Wales, it works to promote local government, supports councils to improve and helps the sector make a difference to people, places and the planet.

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Peeling away Police Report

4 January 2024



Cllr **Alex Coley** (RA Ruxley) is Chair of the borough’s Crime & Disorder committee and Epsom & Ewell’s representative on the Surrey Police & Crime Panel, which holds the Police and Crime Commissioner to account. He writes for the Epsom and Ewell Times on an HM Inspector’s report on Surrey Police.

At the beginning of December, Surrey Police released the latest report from His Majesty’s Inspector of Constabulary. This is known as a PEEL assessment, which stands for police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy.

It is disappointing to see the overall deterioration in a number of areas since the last report two

years ago. Surrey Police is no longer Outstanding in any areas, while areas that were assessed as Good have slipped to Adequate or Requires Improvement.



Cllr. Alex Coley

Residents have frequently told me how unhappy they are about problems trying to contact Surrey Police. ‘Responding to the public’ is now graded as Inadequate in the latest inspection, the lowest rating possible. First contact is paramount, so I am encouraged that a Chief Superintendent has now been appointed to oversee the contact centre, but this will need to be watched closely to turn things around.

The PEEL assessment also shows that Surrey Police is failing to record sexual offences effectively; a serious issue for the flagship priority of preventing Violence Against Women and Girls. Furthermore, when victims report antisocial behaviour, the force is failing to record most crime and to tackle ASB effectively. This has led to a rating of Requires Improvement for ‘Recording data about crime’.

The inspection also shows that ‘Building, supporting and protecting the workforce’ now Requires Improvement in Surrey. Policing is a tough job, with lots of pressure. If the wellbeing of police officers and staff isn’t looked after it’s no surprise this affects performance. The attrition rate for new police officers reflects this assessment rating, with 32% leaving in the first two years.

I have met with the new Chief Constable twice and had the opportunity to ask about his plans for Surrey Police. I have found him to be candid and convincing about the changes that need to happen. He has appraised the situation as a question of leadership. I believe we need to prioritise putting residents first and fighting crime. It’s what we pay our taxes for.

I remain less convinced about the repeated underspend in the Surrey Police Group budget and will continue to raise this with the Police & Crime Commissioner. While I appreciate the desire for resilient reserves, I do not feel it can be justified to squirrel away £43m into treasury management while performance deteriorates. The PCC is directly responsible for financial reserves and the police precept collected from your council tax.

Source: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/peel-assessments/peel-assessments-2023-25/surrey/>

Top image: Surrey Police vehicles in the Epsom and Ewell Town Hall car park. Google.

Underinvestment hits most vulnerable

4 January 2024



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

Surrey Borough running up big debts

4 January 2024



Runnymede Borough Council has been served formal notice over its "significant debt" and an over reliance on commercial income to support its services. The Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has written to the council after the borough borrowed 71 times its core spending power to fund an "investment strategy that produces a less than 1 per cent return".

DLUHC's Best Value Notice was issued after the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy raised concerns in July. The council can still receive, and be awarded, government funding while under the 12 month notice.

Writing to the Runnymede Borough Council (RBC) was Suzanne Clarke, DLUHC's deputy director of finance. She said: "Ministers remain concerned as to Runnymede Borough Council's capacity to comply with its Best Value Duty under the Local Government Act 1999."

Mrs Clarke added: "The authority has significant debt relative to its size, as of March 31, 2023, it had borrowing 71 times their core spending power, which has been used predominantly to invest in the authority's property portfolio. This level of debt poses the authority with capacity challenges, particularly in asset management, commercial and regeneration activity.

"Commercial income represents a substantial revenue source for RBC and is used to support both core and discretionary services, which exposes the authority to significant financial risks should anticipated income fail."

She said the borough has engaged constructively and openly with the accountants and indicated it was taking steps to address the concerns raised in the review.

Responding to the notice, Councillor Tom Gracey, Leader of Runnymede Borough Council said: "It is right that effective scrutiny must be in place around investment and spending decisions to ensure value for money. I am proud of the track record we have delivered in Runnymede in not only providing investment in our social housing, regeneration across communities, and funding services valued by our residents, but also in our sound risk and financial management."

Andrew Pritchard, chief executive of Runnymede Borough Council said the notice reflected the next step in their ongoing and positive dialogue with DLUHC and that most borrowing had been locked in while interest rates were at an historic low. He added: "This borrowing enabled us to fund a mix of commercial investment, improvements to our social housing stock, and complete the regeneration of Addlestone and Egham - all of which now benefits residents."

Councillor Don Whyte, group leader of the Liberal Democrats told the Local Democracy Reporting Service that the council had been waiting a considerable time for DLUHC's decision. He said: "The decision removes a degree of uncertainty and provides some clarity of what it needs to do. The areas that Runnymede are specifically charged with improving are justified, most notably decision making and scrutiny processes, and capacity and capability.

"An example of this is that the Conservative administration have always ensured that the chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is a Conservative, marking their own homework, and not one of the opposition which is deemed best practice in local government."

He added that the Government needed to "take a significant amount of responsibility for the position" local authorities are in "given that loans amounting to billions of pounds were provided by the Public Works Loans Board with minimal due diligence".

Cllr Robert King, Labour group leader, said: "Runnymede can not go on throwing good money after bad at underperforming investments".

He added that questions had been raised about "the investment strategy which produces a less than 1 per cent return" with only "partial plans" for "paying back the debts principle, not just the interest. Something which should have been reviewed long ago, and not just now or with a future peer review from the Local Government Association".

Image: Cllr Thomas Gracey (image Runnymede Borough Council) and Runnymede Borough Council (Grahame Larter)

Tory leader pleads with Tory Government

4 January 2024



Taxpayers in Surrey are likely to be hit with a 5 per cent rate rise because the one-year Government funding package won't cover the county council's £13.5 million budget gap, its leader said.

Surrey County Council will need to make tough decisions on services as it tries to protect money for children, adults and roads, because they "matter most to residents".

In November the county council passed its draft budget which showed the huge gap between income and the cost of providing services. Leader of the Council, Councillor **Tim Oliver** had hoped to convince government officials of the need to increase funding to local authorities that suffered a decade of austerity. The Government's decision means the county council must now "see how it gets to a point where its budget is balanced".

Cllr Oliver, speaking at the Tuesday, December 19 executive committee, said: "It had been my hope and expectation that money would have come from the Government in the form of new money. That would have enabled us to have delivered the services that we want to deliver. The improved service."

He said the Government's offer of a 6.5 per cent increase would normally have been "very welcome" but that it had been an "unusual year". He told the meeting "I'm afraid for the foreseeable future things are going to be considerably more difficult than they have been."

Much of that was due to the double-digit inflation figures, huge increases in demand for services, and wage growth which have seen council costs surge. He said: "We are now faced with the situation where we have the £13.5m gap and I'm afraid the consequence of that is we will no longer be able to restrict council tax increase by 3.99 per cent which was the proposal in our budget last month.

"We will now have to raise council tax by the maximum we are allowed to do which is 5 per cent, 3 per cent on the base and 2 per cent for social care precept. There needs to be recognition from this Government, and indeed any future Government, that the services we provide are the services that are the most in demand."

Council tax in Surrey is made up of three parts, the largest goes to the county council, with an additional amount paying for policing. About 12 per cent of the overall bill goes to the borough or district councils. If the county council were to raise its share by 4.99 per cent it, a Band D property would jump from £1,675.08 to £1,758.67.

That would mean residents in Woking, who are facing a potential 10 per cent increase in their local share would have to pay about £2,338.65 - before any increase from the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Cllr Oliver said there simply needed to be more money going into the system, adding: "We are talking about services for the most vulnerable in our communities. I would implore this government to recognise the issues we have raised. I would implore them to sit down with us and re-evaluate exactly what our needs are. These are issues that are outside of our control and we can not go on with this hand to mouth approach." Further investment, he said, simply won't be possible.

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Surrey getting greener?

4 January 2024



Following its declaration of a climate emergency in 2019, **Surrey County Council** has been on a mission to combat climate change and significantly slash carbon emissions. The council aims to achieve net-zero status for its own operations by 2030 and is rallying for county-wide support to hit the same target by 2050.

Organizational Emission Reductions:

In a comprehensive effort to curtail its carbon footprint, Surrey County Council has assessed key areas within its operations. Notable accomplishments include:

- 7% of the council's vehicle fleet is now comprised of low-carbon alternatives.
- The council has scrutinized 83 buildings across the county to gauge their potential for low-carbon integration.
- Over 3,300 staff members have undergone climate change awareness training, reinforcing the commitment to sustainability.
- 83,000 low-energy streetlights have been installed throughout the county, contributing to substantial energy savings.
- £2.8 million has been saved in the council's annual energy bill through dedicated efforts in energy efficiency.

Empowering Residents and Businesses:

Surrey County Council has not limited its endeavors to internal initiatives but has actively engaged residents and businesses in the fight against climate change. Highlights of these collaborative efforts include:

- Facilitating the planting of an impressive 470,000 trees, contributing to enhanced biodiversity and carbon sequestration.
- The introduction of 31 electric buses now operational in the county, marking a significant stride in public transportation electrification.
- Hosting 13,000 electric vehicle charging sessions across the county, promoting the transition to cleaner transportation options.
- 88 Eco-Schools have been awarded green flag status, recognizing their commitment to sustainable practices.
- A collective effort has resulted in saving an estimated 20,000 tonnes of carbon emissions.
- Addressing fuel poverty, the council has treated 1,350 homes, ensuring they are energy-efficient and economically sustainable.
- Over £1.9 million in grants have been awarded to support small to medium-sized businesses, yielding an annual saving of £821,000 through improved energy efficiency measures.

For those eager to delve deeper into Surrey's climate change initiatives, a wealth of information is available on the council's dedicated climate change webpage.

Related reports:

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Image courtesy SCC

Catalogue of errors - death inquest

4 January 2024



A Woking family has spoken of their “incredibly difficult time” after losing their son saying “there is nothing that can take away the pain”. Their comments came after an inquest concluded a catalogue of failures by Surrey County Council and other bodies contributed to the death of 18-year-old diabetic Jake Baker.

Jake, who also had learning disabilities, died on December 31, 2019, while visiting his family home. It was the first time he had stayed away from his care facilities for more than two nights in a row, since being placed in the care of the Surrey County Council when eight years old, his family lawyers said.

The teenager arrived home on Christmas Eve, became unwell on December 28 and was found unresponsive on New Year’s Eve by his mother and stepfather, neither of whom had been trained to recognise or seek medical advice for a deterioration in Jake’s diabetes.

According to the family’s lawyers, Coroner Carolyn Topping said Jake’s death was avoidable and, if he had been admitted to hospital any time before 5pm on December 29, he would have been successfully treated.

They added that the coroner said there had been “a systemic failing on the part of Surrey County Council to adequately train and oversee personal advisers about their legal obligations in preparing pathway plans for children leaving care”.

In a statement, the family said: “Losing Jake has been incredibly difficult for our family, especially as he died in our home at what should have been a happy time. We trusted Ruskin Mill Trust with Jake’s care, and we have been let down by them in the worst possible way. Jake was an enthusiastic and determined young man who always put his mind to things. He was happy to help out in the garden or with DIY.

“He had a kind soul and would get very excited when meeting new people. He loved dogs and playing pranks on his brothers and sisters. Jake wanted to be more independent and was keen to learn but to anyone who met him it was clear that he needed help, particularly in handling his diabetes.

“Before Jake turned 18, he had a key worker that we trusted and who he had a great relationship with. We were able to spend time together as a family safely, knowing that Jake was well supported by the staff at Burbank children’s home. This changed when Jake moved from Burbank to Ruskin Mill College. We were told it would be his road to independence and from this point on we didn’t have much contact with the people who were supposed to be supporting Jake. We were never made fully aware of how severely his diabetes could affect him, or how he should be managing it.

“As a family we did all we could to make sure that Jake was looking after himself and was well taken care of, but those that were put in charge of his care didn’t give us the information necessary to ensure Jake’s safety. There is nothing that can take away the pain of losing Jake, but it is our hope that lessons will be learned from his death so that another tragedy is prevented.”

The cause of death was given as diabetic ketoacidosis.

Jake had been living at a residential college run by Ruskin Mill Trust in Stroud, for 15 months.

The trust is a charity that provides specialist education for young people with learning difficulties and special educational needs.

The coroner also said the trust failed to ensure Jake’s safety when he went home for contact with his family. Following his death Transform Residential Limited, the body responsible for providing care services to Ruskin Mill Trust, was ordered to pay a total of £22,721.04 at Staines Magistrates’ Court, after pleading guilty to causing a resident avoidable harm, the Care Quality Commission said.

Jake had been a resident at Glasshouse College since November 18 2019. Previously he lived at Ruskin Mill College, run by the same provider.

According to the family’s lawyers, the coroner said Jake lacked the ability to be wholly independent in managing his

diabetes and was not given any information about the dangers for him to have unsupported contact if his blood sugars became imbalanced.

They added that Ms Topping said those involved in making decisions for Jake, from the Surrey Care Leavers team and Children's Services, failed to ensure Jake's safety when he went home for overnight contact from March 2019 and that Ruskin Mill Trust failed to ensure Jake's safety.

Anna Moore, who represented Jake's family, said: "The coroner's detailed investigation and critical findings illustrate a catalogue of failings that led to Jake's death. Jake's family welcome these conclusions and hope that lessons will be learned from his death. What is particularly important is that those authorities entrusted to look after children and support them through their transition to adulthood are doing so properly.

"The evidence heard at the inquest showed that no one with current responsibility for Jake had a clear picture of needs and what support he required. Very worryingly, those at Surrey County Council who were meant to be supporting Jake into his transition to adulthood were not aware of the scope and extent of this important role. This needs to be urgently addressed so that children and young adults, and particularly people like Jake with additional needs, are given the support they need when they turn 18 and beyond."

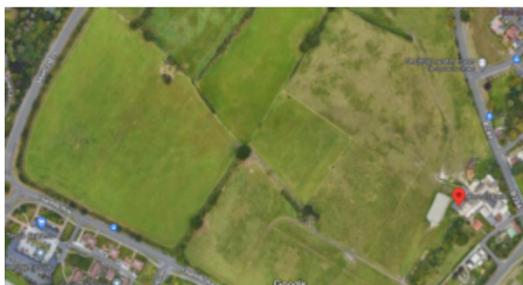
Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning at Surrey County Council, said: "Our deepest sympathies remain with Jake's family and friends at this difficult time. The services provided to Jake fell short of what he and his family needed to keep him safe, and we are very sorry for our part in that. We have taken a number of actions over the past four years to improve our support for young adults leaving care. While we have already made changes, we know there is still further to go and we will carefully consider the coroner's findings as we take our next steps."

Ruskin Mill Trust took over responsibility for residential care from Transform Residential Limited in August 2020. A spokesperson said: "Jake's death was heart-breaking and our thoughts remain with his family. He was well known to our staff and his loss came as a profound shock to everyone here. We deeply regret that in this instance some key measures that should have been in place for his visit home were overlooked. We aim to provide the highest standards of care.

"Since this tragedy occurred, the overnight risk assessment protocol has been fully reviewed and we have taken steps to strengthen practice, policies and procedures to ensure this kind of incident never happens again."

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.

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."

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“The Wizard of Oz” works its magic in Epsom

4 January 2024



Friday 15th December was opening night for this seasons annual pantomime at the **Epsom Playhouse**. **Kate Spiller**, founder of the production company said “We are delighted to present the classic tale of ‘THE WIZARD OF OZ’ ... This well known story follows Dorothy in her adventures along the ‘Yellow Brick Road: Her 3 great friends -The Lion, Tin Man and The Scarecrow join her in her search for the Wonderful Wizard. We have stuck very closely to the original story line with our production, although this talented cast have added much comedy and humour.”

She added “Many thanks must be given to **Mrs Elaine Teague** and her team at the Playhouse, who work very hard throughout the year to bring you a whole array of theatrical productions. Special thanks are also due to the great number of ‘mums and dads’ that have driven their children to rehearsals and performances over the last few weeks allowing us to have over 200 Munchkins in the show and opening up a whole new world to these talented youngsters.”

The players maintained a giddy momentum and energy throughout a packed programme of dance routines, pantomime banter and adult innuendoes.

The synchronization of vivid computer animated backdrops, a lively sound-track and the stage actions worked wonders in creating the dream-like qualities at the heart of the Wizard of Oz experience.

Sadly, copyright issues and cost mean the songs we are familiar with from the original “Judy Garland” film version will not be sung at the Playhouse.

Shining though were the performances of Emily Day as Dorothy, Rikki Stone’s scarecrow and though unpopular in the traditional way, Jake Anthony Pearse’s charismatic role as the Wicked Witch was appreciated at the final curtain.

The Lisa Jayn dancers didn’t miss a beat in a variety of the main dance routines.

No less than six local young persons dance groups sourced the 200 little munchkins. None could have been taller than 4 feet. 20 were on stage at a time and performed with great professionalism. They included The Arnould School of Dancing, Gemini Dancers, The Italia Conti - Reigate, Joco Dance and Theatre Arts, Starstruck and Epsom’s Terri-Jayne’s School of Dance.

The success of the night is a tribute to the workings of an Epsom and Ewell Borough Council owned and managed arts venue, working in collaboration with artists in the private sector.

You can get tickets for performances through to 1st January 2024 via the Epsom Playhouse box office. Even at the full adult price of £25 the entertainment is good value for money and no commuting necessary.

Top salary for bottom borough

4 January 2024



Woking Borough Council’s new managing director will be tasked with navigating its “grave” and “extremely vulnerable position” - and be paid more than any other council CEO’s salary while they do so.

The latest government report into the state of the council’s debt recovery was published this week when it was also confirmed who would succeed Julie Fisher as Chief Executive.

Epsom and Ewell Times receives frequent reports on the appalling financial plight of Woking Borough Council. Its debt is £2.6 billion. We seek to select those that may be of greatest interest.

Mrs Fisher announced in November her decision to quit, less than two years after stepping into the top job in April 2021. Her replacement has been announced as Richard Carr who will take on the role as Managing Director Commissioner on an interim basis.

According to the letter sent to Woking Borough Council, Mr Carr will be “entitled to a fee” of £1,100 for each day he is there, up to 260 days, as well as expenses. This is more than any other council CEO’s salary, not including pension contributions. Other CEOs once pension packets are included – would receive a higher total package.

This works out as £286,000 if he stayed for the period, and it “is the council’s responsibility to meet these costs”, the report reads. Anything above this needs prior approval of the Secretary of State.

Surrey County Council’s CEO Joanna Killian receives a salary of £234,600 and oversees a larger budget. Comparable Surrey borough councils Runnymede, Spelthorne and Elmbridge pocket £138,000, £142,000, and £145,220 respectively. [The UK Prime Minister’s salary is £164,951.]

In a letter to outgoing CEO Julie Fisher, the commissioners said: “Your authority has worked collaboratively and cooperatively with the commissioners. That being said, the situation remains grave.

“The first report, published on October 19, made it clear that the scale of the challenge at your Authority ‘should not be underestimated’.

“In their second report the commissioners continue to paint a stark picture of the challenges, noting that the authority remains in an extremely vulnerable position due to its overhanging debt and historical lack of rigour in its commercial activity. In the short-term, tough decisions need to be made, requiring clear leadership across the authority, and a steady hand at the wheel. In the longer term, innovative solutions need to be developed to tackle Woking’s financial position and organisational model.

“With this in mind, coupled with your resignation as chief executive, the Secretary of State deems that any corporate leadership gap in Woking poses too great a risk to the integrity of the authority. The Secretary of State has therefore made the decision to increase the capacity of the commissioner team to enable focus on the long-term challenges the authority faces and has appointed a managing director commissioner to join.”

Once his appointment begins, Mr Carr will be responsible for day-to-day operations of the council, provide strategic direction, and implement “efficiencies” .

The letter continued: “It remains clear that, although progress has been made, the most difficult phases of the authority’s recovery are still yet to begin, and there is still much work to be done to ensure Woking Borough Council can again meet its best value duty independently.”

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, leader of Woking Borough Council, said: “I’m pleased that the Commissioners have recognised the council’s hard work and the progress we have made in their second report, while setting out clearly the very significant challenges the council continues to face.” She added: “I’m delighted that Julie Fisher has kindly agreed to stay on as chief executive until April to ensure that the council has the senior leadership it needs over that period and to enable an effective handover to Richard.”

Magic Table for Adults with Dementia

4 January 2024



Residents and staff at Banstead Library celebrated the launch of the award-winning innovation from the Netherlands. The Tovertafel (Dutch for “magic table”), is a ceiling mounted projector that projects light games onto a standard table surface. These games are interactive, immersive games that can be played sitting down by a group of people, they encourage social contact, movement and are both relaxing and fun!

Banstead library staff held an open day last week where members of the public got the chance to see the technology in action and try it for themselves.

The Tovertafel supports people living with dementia as well as adults with learning disabilities. The games and activities respond to hand and arm movements and are designed to stimulate physical activity and social interaction, inspiring those living with dementia to be more active.

Banstead library was chosen as the location for the Tovertafel as it is part of a working group to help make Banstead a

dementia friendly village. The aim is to work with organisations such as Age Concern, care homes, the local Community Link Officer, and Community and Prevention Officer to bring together community workers and organisation who will support and help residents living with dementia, and their carers.

Surrey County Council Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Customer and Communities Councillor Denise Turner-Stewart said: “We are delighted to introduce the Tovertafel at Banstead library and offer this vital immersive experience to local residents and their families – it’s a fantastic tool that will be not only be a source of joy and entertainment, but which will also make a valuable difference to the lives of residents with dementia in Surrey.

“The installation of the Tovertafel demonstrates Surrey County Council’s commitment to creating a dementia friendly community where no one is left behind, and showcase our libraries are re-imagined spaces that provide so much more to residents than just books.”

To find out more about The Tovertafel, or to register your interest, please contact Banstead Library via banstead.library@surreycc.gov.uk.

Find out more about Dementia support in libraries: <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/libraries/health-and-wellbeing/dementia>

Epsom and Ewell Borough of Sanctuary

4 January 2024



Epsom and Ewell is now poised to be a Borough of Sanctuary. Largely due to the extraordinary efforts of **Nina Kaye** and **Jo Sherring** of the Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network our Town’s welcome to and support for refugees of all nationalities is recognised by this new status. Tuesday 12th December the Council approved a motion to establish the title of “Borough of Sanctuary.”



Janice Baker leads English classes in central Epsom for refugees of all nationalities.

Proposing the motion Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town Ward) said: “The Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network has been now going for over 10 years. 700-plus people have signed up to receive information on a regular basis from the Refugee Network. There are over 200 refugees registered, there’s approximately 40 hours a week given for people whose first language is not English, and there are 85 refugees that take advantage of that. They are part of The Good Company, which is the Food Bank, Epsom Pantry and East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission. These are organizations that are good in their own right. They’re saving the borough money, doing an enormous amount of good work, and providing a humane service to refugees that happen to end up here.”

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) seconded the motion and said “Everyone deserves a safe place to live where they can thrive, build the life they want, and get the support when they need it. This government is creating a hostile environment for many people living in our communities by pursuing policies that divide and exclude people with migrant and refugee backgrounds.”

“Shouldn’t Epsom be offering a positive vision of a culture of welcome and hospitality to all? Create opportunities for relationships of friendship and solidarity between local people and those seeking sanctuary. Recognize and encourage partnership working and network development across the borough. This government’s policy is to send people who are fleeing persecution and conflict to Rwanda. It says it gave £140 million to Rwanda last year, and on December 7th, the Home Office civil servant said that a further £100 million had been given, with a payment of £50 million anticipated for next year. Today, I hear it’s actually £400 million. Now we hear the Home Office has earmarked at least £700 million to manage the arrival of migrants in small boats.”

“So, they’ve just allocated £700 million to supporting these policies that are hostile, muddled, and expensive, with no benefit for people seeking sanctuary in this country. The Borough can contribute to changing the narrative of this government. The sanctuary movement not only offers a chance for individuals and groups to challenge the way the asylum debate is framed in the UK, but is also concerned with creating a culture in which the virtues of welcome and hospitality are valued and through which asylum seekers and refugees are free to make a full contribution to their cities and to engage with local communities.”

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said “Last year as mayor, I got some insights into the work of the Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network and our own team, the Community Development Team, in their work with refugees, and I think it was quite inspiring, but also to actually meet some of those refugees and see what we do for them, we the community, and how much it’s appreciated. I think over the last year or so, working together, Epsom and Ewell Council and the Refugee Network have done some exceptional work delivering extremely positive outcomes, helping refugee households settle within our borough.”

The Homes for Ukraine scheme launched in March 2022, and since then, we’ve supported over 160 Ukrainian families. Working together, Epsom Council and the Refugee Network have provided extensive support to those families, some of whom have had very complex needs and have been through some traumatic experiences. There’s no doubt that the consequences of the war in Ukraine triggered a step change in the borough’s requirements to support refugees, which was fairly small-scale when it was limited to Syrian and Afghan families. But collaborative working has been crucial to our ability to scale up our responses and to do some proactive work in sustaining the relationships between hosts and guests, which has had an enormous impact. I think only two or three families are presented as homeless, so that’s a remarkable achievement when you think that Ukrainian families have been living with host families since the onset of the war and it saved us, as well as giving them security, it saved this Council a lot of money.”

Responding to the decision Nina Kaye told the Epsom and Ewell Times: “We support over 200 families with over 400 refugees and EERN provides over 40 hours of English lessons each week.

“We are delighted that Epsom & Ewell Borough Council have overwhelmingly passed a motion pledging to work with us to make Epsom & Ewell a Borough of Sanctuary as part of the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network (<https://la.cityofsanctuary.org/>). We work closely with EEBC to support refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution. We are very pleased that the Council want Epsom & Ewell to be recognised as a Borough of Sanctuary. We feel this reflects the huge support we receive in this area to help those who have been forced to flee their countries and find themselves in our community.”

Related reports:

Hosts of Ukrainian refugees appreciated

Flight of refugees: history repeating?

Breaking the mould for Ukrainian refugees

Local refugee cash appeal

Image: Raimond Spekking

Two Q or Not to Q? That was the Q....

4 January 2024



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council debated public participation in its committees on Tuesday 12th December. A proposed amendment to standing orders has the effect of restricting a member of the public to asking only one question on a topic and being confined to one supplementary question on that topic only if it arises from the answer given to the first question. And this remains the case even if there is no other member of the public wishing to use what may remain of the 30 minutes the rules provide for public participation at the meeting.

Cllr Chris Ames (Labour Court) was unhappy with this apparent restriction on residents taking part in local democracy. He moved an amendment to send back the proposal to the Council’s constitution drafting sub-committee for a re-think.

He said the rules should “not only encourage but also should not unduly restrict the right of residents to participate in public meetings.”

In relation to the rules determining whether a resident’s question qualified to be asked he emphasized the importance of avoiding unnecessary administrative burdens on officers while promoting transparency in the democratic process.

Cllr Liz Frost (RA Woodcote and Langley) chair of the sub-committee did not accept Cllr Ames amendment and so a debate ensued.

Cllr Ames went on to argue the Council should actively encourage residents who voted for them to participate in the democratic process. In his view, the rules in question imposed unnecessary restrictions on residents, hindering their

ability to engage effectively in public meetings. He expressed concern about the potential detachment of councillors from the residents.

He described the new rules as a retrograde step.

One specific point of contention for Cllr Ames was the addition of the words “and final” to an existing rule, which, in his interpretation, unnecessarily restricted the order in which questions could be asked. He called for moral courage if the Council indeed intended to restrict residents to two questions and suggested that any such restriction should be clearly stated, perhaps subject to the chair’s discretion and the existing 30-minute time limit.

He also disputed the notion that residents asking more questions would significantly burden officers, pointing out that the Council had constructed a set of rules making the process labour-intensive in the first place. In his view, the focus should be on eliminating cumbersome rules that deter resident participation.

Additionally, Cllr Ames challenged the alleged rule that a second question must be on a separate topic from the first, deeming it as another way of stifling debate. He brought up an incident where a resident was initially invited to ask a supplementary question but was later told he could not ask a second question on the same issue.

As a journalist Cllr Ames drawing from his extensive experience with Freedom of Information requests, shared his insights into how public bodies tended to complain about the cost of answering questions while simultaneously relying on rules and restrictions to avoid transparency, particularly when uncomfortable issues were raised.

He concluded by urging the Council to discard what he termed as ludicrous rules and embrace a more open approach, allowing residents to participate even if it meant confronting uncomfortable truths. Despite his impassioned plea, Cllr Frost reiterated her rejection of the proposed amendment and the “clarified” rule on public questions was approved by the majority of Councillors.

Related Reports:

[Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?](#)

Image: Cllr Ames rises in the Council Chamber. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Youtube channel.

Epsom and Ewell Council staff awarded 6%

4 January 2024



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council 12th December agreed to award its staff a 6% increase to their salaries. Councillors had been advised that despite inflation moderating to some extent through 2023, there have been widespread strikes and industrial action across the public sector in response to pay deals. For 2024/25, the government has accepted the recommendations from a number of independent pay review bodies to award millions of public sector workers including police officers and teachers, pay awards in the range of 5-7%.

Additionally the Council was warned the cost of any deal is crucial, with the council already facing a budget deficit of £1.1m in 2024/25. In budget planning for the medium-term financial strategy pay has been assumed to be 3% for the next 4 years, therefore any award above 3% will increase the council’s projected deficit and result in additional, compensating service income or savings having to be identified.

Cllr Robert Leech (RA Nonsuch) said “I support the 6% pay rise. In recent years, we’ve given the staff 3%, which is less than the rate of inflation. This means that in real terms, our officers have taken a pay cut. I do not think it’s sustainable for a third year. I realize that the rate of inflation has come down, but that only partly compensates for the reductions in previous years.”

Cllr Alison Kelly (LibDem Stamford) said “I agree that we need to support the 6%. We must make sure that all our staff are feeling that they’re well-treated and they shouldn’t be looking elsewhere just to be able to live. With staff retention being such an issue for all councils, I think it’s vital that the pay is appropriate.”

Cllr Hannah Dalton (RA Stoneleigh) said “I want to use this opportunity to thank all of our officers for all that they do. They work really very, very hard for us. If Councilor Beckett was here, he would be reminding us how many officers there were when he first joined the council, and it’s significantly reduced.”

The recommendation was carried by a majority in the Council Chamber.

Related report

[Council staff to get 6% pay increase?](#)

Epsom and Ewell Council goes East

4 January 2024



Councillors at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council voted last night to undertake the relocation of the council's Town Hall accommodation. Staff currently located at the Town Hall will move to 70 East Street, a modern purpose-built office building in central Epsom.

The move will bring about a number of significant benefits:

- **Financial benefits:** Remaining in the Town Hall building would require it to have extensive, costly refurbishment over the coming years to comply with energy efficiency and fire regulations, along with general maintenance of existing building structures which are reaching end of life, which would cost more than twice as much as the cost of relocating. In addition, the move will create significant operating cost savings into the long term, with annual operating costs expected to reduce by over 50%. These future costs savings will help sustain key service delivery.
- **Environmental benefits:** The new building will be more energy efficient and sustainable with a smaller carbon footprint, enabling the council to deliver on its ambitions to be a greener council and to become carbon neutral by 2035.
 - **Service benefits:** The move will provide a modern and fit-for-the-future workplace that will best serve the Borough.

The East Street building is already owned by the Council. It is a five-minute walk to the High Street and bus stops are located directly outside the building, providing easily accessible public transport. The building also provides its own parking, serving visitors and those with mobility issues.

It is intended that 70 East Street will not accommodate the Council Chamber, and instead a separate proposal is being developed to locate this in Bourne Hall, Ewell.

Cllr **Neil Dallen**, Chair of the Strategy & Resources Committee, said:

"Our focus must always be on what is best for our residents, and the significant financial and environmental benefits of this move are clear. The current Town Hall building is expensive to run and contains a significant amount of unused space. The new building is smaller and will be far more cost-efficient. The costs involved with the move are far outweighed by the savings that we will make through avoiding the Town Hall refurbishment and through significantly reduced running costs into the long-term.

"Just as importantly, the move will allow us to progress towards our target to become a carbon-neutral council by 2035. We believe the relocation will provide multiple benefits to the borough."

Jackie King, Chief Executive of the council, said:

"Relocating council staff to a smaller, modern and fit-for-purpose building aligns strongly with our ongoing determination to be a modern, forward-looking organisation that can best meet the needs of our residents. We are excited to progress with this move and improve value for money for our taxpayers as well as continue to provide the best services possible to the community."

Work continues to look at options for the existing Town Hall site and this will form the subject of a separate report to the council's Strategy and Resources Committee in due course.

The image is the creation of Epsom and Ewell Times not Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Related reports:

[A new Town Hall for Epsom and Ewell?](#)

Alderman awards for Epsom and Ewell trio

4 January 2024



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Tuesday 12th December conferred the title Alderman of the Borough on three men who long served the district as local councillors.

Former Councillor Eber Kington (RA), a stalwart in local governance, dedicated an impressive 36 years of service as an Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor, presiding as Mayor of the Borough in 1999-2000 and Deputy Mayor in 2000-2001.

Similarly, former Councillor Chris Frost (RA), with 24 years of devoted service from May 1999 to May 2023, held the role of Mayor of the Borough in 2015-2016 and Deputy Mayor in 2014-2015.

The late former Councillor Clive Smitheram (RA), who served for 23 years until April 2022, receives his recognition posthumously. His term included the role of Mayor of the Borough in 2010-2011 and Deputy Mayor in 2011-2012.

During the meetings Councillors Peter O'Donovan, Clive Woodbridge, Liz Frost, Neil Dallen, Alex Coley, Jan Mason and Hannah Dalton (RAs) paid tributes to each nominee.

At 9:55 pm the motion carried unanimously in the absence of LibDem and Labour councillors, who earlier had left the Chamber.

Related reports:

Local Council stalwarts up for local honour

Long serving Councillor Clive Smitheram dies at 76

Image: Chris Frost, Eber Kington and Clive Smitheram

Local Plan costs eat into Council reserves

4 January 2024



An officers' report to the Council advised a further £629,000 is required to progress the Local Plan 2022-2040. The matter was considered by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Strategy and Resources Committee Tuesday 13th December.

The report provided an update on the financial position on advancing the Local Plan toward submission and subsequent adoption, aligning with the timelines outlined in the recently published Local Development Scheme (November 2023). Following a public consultation on the draft plan earlier this year, an extraordinary Council meeting in March 2023 decided to temporarily halt the Local Plan. It was subsequently resumed in October 2023, accompanied by an updated timetable.

The financial crunch, estimated at £629,000, revolves around progressing the plan to Regulation 19 and concluding the Local Plan Examination. To address this, the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee recommended allocating £629,000 from the Corporate Projects Reserve. However, this move comes with significant financial implications, as it would reduce the reserve balance from £2.98 million to £2.35 million. If an additional request to use this reserve, hinted at in reference to a matter concerning the Council's commercial property - which was excluded from public and press scrutiny, is approved, the balance would further decrease to £1.85 million.

The item from which the press and public was excluded concerned drawing half-million pounds of taxpayers' money from the Council's reserves - we quote from the Local Plan item in public view: "Should the separate request to use this reserve at Agenda item 4 also be approved, the reserve balance will further decrease (from £2.35m) to £1.85m." The ground of exclusion was to protect financial information of third parties. Do you think such interests should out-weigh taxpayers' interests in what might justify £1/2 million being taken from reserves? Write to Epsom and Ewell Times.

The Council is facing a projected revenue budget deficit of £1.1m from 2024/25 (as reported to Strategy & Resources Committee in July 2023) and reserves are likely to come under substantial pressure in future years and may fall below the recommended level of £1 million.

The officers' report underscored the importance of maintaining staffing levels and securing external technical support to ensure a robust and timely Local Plan. Any deviation from the Local Development Scheme could amplify costs and resource implications. Despite the financial challenges, the Council was urged to use existing in-house resources wherever possible, given the projected revenue budget deficit.

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) queried whether it was necessary to extend officers' contracts to 2026 when the Local Plan is to be submitted in 2025. The Council was advised that the opportunities for legal challenges and so forth would extend to 2026 and therefore they needed to budget for extending officer employment contracts by two years.

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) vented his frustration thus: "I probably have to support this recommendation, but I should do so with gritted teeth. This local plan just seems to be a bottomless pit. I understand that it has cost one and a half million pounds already, and that's probably only half the amount that we will waste. In my opinion, it is a waste of £3 million when the whole project of coming up with a local plan and planning applications could be done more simply. This filled me with horror.

In a recent RA meeting, I pointed out that this worked out at £50 for every household in the country. I asked the people there to put their hands up if they were happy for £50, which is, in effect, their money, to be spent on producing this rather than having £50 to spend on food and energy bills. The number of hands that went up, in round numbers, was a round number. The residents, I think, share my view that we are just wasting money.

I realize that we have to meet a legal obligation, and I would certainly never advocate that the council breaks the law. But I think we should point out that this is being imposed on us by central government. They provide us with no grant at all, apart from perhaps a few specific pet projects of their own. While we have to carry on with the local plan, we should make it clear that we do so reluctantly, only because the law forces us to do so, and that we should make clear to our residents that central government is the villain in this pantomime.

The present government is about to announce a new planning policy. If we have a general election next year with a Labour government, they have said that they will just ride roughshod over local authorities. I shall support the motion, and I shall do so with great reluctance."

Following these two contributions from the Chamber the committee proceeded to unanimously accept the recommendation to draw £629,000 from reserves to fund the ongoing Local Plan process.

The contribution to the prolongation and additional cost of the Local Plan process arising from the unpopularity of the original draft's proposals to develop Green Belt was not mentioned by any Councillor.

Related reports:

[Local Plan to move forward after passionate debate](#)

[Local Plan \(2022-2040\) Un-Pause Recommended](#)

[Cllr Persand intervenes ahead of Local Plan debate](#)

and many many more (search "Local Plan")

Smoke safety lessons for Surrey services

4 January 2024



A 63-year-old bedridden man was killed in a house fire after smoking in bed, shortly after an "inexperienced" officer carried out an "unscrutinised" safety visit of his independent living flat.

In February 2023, Kevin O'Hara died from smoke inhalation and burns after falling asleep while smoking, an inquest found. Mr O'Hara had been visited in his Frimley home by Surrey Fire and Rescue on November 17, 2022, for a 'safe and well visit' which failed to identify the correct position for the smoke detector or his careline monitor.

A later visit by Surrey's Adult Social Care team, on January 23, 2023, also failed to include a risk assessment - despite concerns for his health and the dangers of smoking in bed.

This was all the more urgent as it was known that would not be able to get himself out of the house independently in the

event of a fire. According to the Prevention of Death report, Mr O'Hara died in a fire that started from a lit cigarette "igniting debris" on a crash mat next to his bed. His smoke detectors and the intercom box, however, were in the hallway and the door shut.

The alarm was only triggered when enough smoke had built up to seep through the top of the living room door. Mr O'Hara died before emergency teams could reach him.

Both Surrey Fire and Rescue, as well as Surrey Adult Social Care, say they have since undertaken work to mitigate the risks of a recurrence, including serious incident reports, increased training and greater coordination across teams. They say they have also adopted an improved 'person at risk' referral system to better identify fire dangers to individuals.

The coroner, Susan Ridge, however said more needs to be done to ensure a review system is in place to give more oversight to experienced staff. The report reads: "Evidence was given that the Safe and Well Visit in November 2022 was conducted by an inexperienced officer. The results of that visit did not seem to be subject to any scrutiny. Surrey Fire and Rescue does not appear to have in place a system of review or audit by line managers or more experienced staff of completed Safe and Well Visits, with the risk, as in this case, that errors or issues requiring action are not identified."

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council: "We would like to express our deepest condolences to Mr O'Hara's family and anyone else affected by his tragic death. We recognise the importance of learning from serious incidents and carried out a review of what happened in this case which led to our fire and rescue service and adult social care service working together to introduce a new process for identifying people at risk. Surrey Fire and Rescue Service has also enhanced its training for officers involved in Safe and Well Visits and is in the process of developing a quality assurance system to identify and address potential risks more effectively.

"We will continue to embed an understanding of prevention activity across the service. Within adult social care, we have taken steps to strengthen management oversight over risk assessments and have brought in further training for staff.

"While we have taken a number of actions in the months since this case, we are carefully considering the coroner's findings and are committed to doing all we can to improve the way we support vulnerable people and manage any fire risks they face."

Image: illustration purposes only.

Credit:Vadym Plysiuk