

# The Plan to improve Planning pays off

6 October 2023



**Epsom & Ewell Borough Council** have received official notification from the Minister of State for Housing and Planning, Rachel Maclean MP, that their planning department is no longer under review for designation.

In April 2023 the council, along with nine other local authorities, received a letter from **Michael Gove** MP, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which stated that due to the performance levels of the council on planning applications during October 2020 and September 2022, designating the council was under consideration.

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See **Epsom and Ewell Times** report of 15th May 2023 Epsom and Ewell planning improving after Government threat?

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The council had been fully aware of this historic issue relating to performance over that period, which was a result of Covid and capacity-related issues. Having acknowledged the issues, the council took swift decisive action to address them, securing additional staffing resourcing within the department as well as investing in IT and improved ways of working.

As a result of the council's actions, service levels and performance on planning applications improved rapidly and significantly. Since early 2022, the council has continued to determine at least 90% of planning applications within the statutory timescale target, compared to the government threshold of 70%:

- Apr-Jun 2022 - 95%
- Jul-Sep 2022 - 91%
- Oct-Dec 2022 - 95%
- Jan-Mar 2023 - 96%
- Apr-Jun 2023 - 95%.
- Jul-Sept 2023 - 90%

**Jackie King**, Chief Executive of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, said:

"We are very pleased that the Secretary of State has recognised the issues the council faced were historic and temporary in nature, and that the council has worked very hard to take significant proactive steps to address and improve them, resulting in our Planning Department far exceeding national targets over the past five consecutive quarters. We have a strong and stable team and systems in place and are very confident that we will continue to provide a high level of service, over and above what is expected, into the future."

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# Surrey schools fly their green flags

6 October 2023



**Surrey County Council** has been confirmed with the highest number of schools awarded with a **Green Flag** of any local authority in England, with its **88 Eco-Schools**, all of which have a Green Flag status - the highest accreditation in the scheme.

**Eco-Schools** is the largest education programme in the world which helps sustainability become an integral part of school life. Eco-Schools is pupil lead, supports the enrichment of the curriculum and helps unite young people and the

wider school community to care more about protecting the environment and making positive changes.

Various projects have been set up across Surrey's schools and have had a positive impact on the environment. Activities that have taken place include:

- Building new ponds to increase biodiversity.
- Creating allotments to grow vegetables.
- Planting trees to encourage more wildlife and improve air quality.
- Running switch off campaigns to save energy.
- Making signs for bins to make sure people use the correct bins, to help increase recycling.
- Building a greenhouse out of plastic bottles to grow plants.
- Following national campaigns such as Walk to School Week.

The projects have engaged over 50,000 pupils and are already reaping benefits which include:

- Saving a total of 648,330kwh of electricity
- Diverting 111,645 tonnes of waste from landfill
- Creating 8,322 (m2) of natural habitat
- 7,400 pupils participating in walking and cycling initiatives.

**Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Environment said:** *"This project is so important and very close to my heart because we know informing and educating the young generation will pay dividends in the future to protect our environment. I am so proud that Surrey's schools are getting behind the green agenda and are encouraging so many young people to play their part to help tackle climate change. We know it's a joint effort and if everyone plays their part, we really can have a positive impact."*

*"It's an amazing achievement to be recognised as the highest performing county and hope this also inspires other Surrey schools to find out more and get involved."*

**Adam Flint, Eco-Schools England Manager from Eco-Schools said:** *"In academic year '22/23, schools in Surrey County Council achieved more Eco-Schools Green Flags than any other county council in the country. When it comes to enabling young people and schools staff to make positive impacts on our planet, the region is exemplary. The Council has supported their schools in various, showing a great commitment to the future of their pupils and placing faith in them to lead action on climate change and work for a better future for everyone. It's a phenomenal achievement."*

More information about Eco-Schools in Surrey, including how to sign up can be found on [here](#).

**Sign up to the Greener Matters newsletter** to keep up to date on progress towards the target of making Surrey net zero by 2050 and find out what you can do to help.

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## Child psychological waiting in Surrey eats savings

6 October 2023



Families are using their "savings and holiday money" to pay for private educational psychologist assessments having been told they would wait two years for an assessment through the council, a select committee has heard.

One councillor said all families who had been told they faced a two-year wait and had opted to fund a private assessment should get their money back and Surrey County Council would fork out for the refund.

Questions were also raised about how well the council was communicating with parents over eligibility and the scheme to refund parents, at a meeting of the county council's children, families, lifelong learning and culture select committee on Monday (October 2).

The meeting heard about the steps being taken to reduce the wait times for children getting an education, health and care plan (EHCP), which is put in place to ensure children with additional needs or disabilities get the provision they need at

school.

In 2022, Surrey was completing just 26 per cent of EHCPs within the legally required 20-week timeframe, down from 65 per cent in 2021. The council is aiming to be back over the target of 60 per cent of EHCPs issued within 20 weeks by the end of May 2024.

For the summer and autumn terms of 2023, a temporary reimbursement offer is in place for parents, up to a maximum of £925, where private advice has been obtained and where no further Surrey County Council professional advice is required.

The offer is part of the steps being taken to try to improve the council's speed of getting through EHCPs, with a shortage of educational psychologists being one of the factors behind the delays.

Councillor Rachael Lake (Conservative, Walton) said she had been in contact with a family who were told in summer 2022 there would be a two-year wait, and challenged the policy of only allowing reimbursements in specific circumstances. Cllr Lake said: "Last summer when this family was told that it was a minimum two year waiting list, in writing, they chose to use their family savings and holiday money for an assessment which Surrey County Council has accepted in its totality and has acted upon, for which they are extremely grateful. Had they not spent this money, they would be one of the people still waiting this summer with another year to go."

She said she thought it was "wrong" that this family could not apply for the money to be given back to them, saying she thought any family told they would have a minimum of two years to wait should be eligible.

One parent spoke to the select committee and said they only became aware that private assessments could be considered on September 22, when they were told by the caseworker helping with their daughter's request.

The parent was sent a link to a web page which no longer existed and said she had only found out that there had been an extension to the eligibility criteria when asking questions ahead of the select committee meeting.

She said: "I commend the committee's efforts to try and reduce waiting lists, but without effective communication, both internally to your staff and externally, the decisions and policies that you make are meaningless."

The meeting's chair said it was clear the council had a "challenge communicating with parents and carers".

Cllr Fiona Davidson (Residents for Guildford and Villages, Guildford South-East) said: "I'm not sure that we're really tackling it as effectively as I think everyone would choose. On behalf of the committee, I would certainly ask if there was a renewed focus on those communications."

Assessments for EHCPs will be carried out in chronological order, starting with those who have been waiting longest, except for more vulnerable children, where there is a safeguarding concern, or where they are due to transfer to the next phase of their education, which are being prioritised for completion on time.

Documents show that in order to catch up with the outstanding EHCPs, the county council will need to issue 330 overdue EHCPs in September, 321 in October and 260 in November.

The number of overdue plans being issued per month will be over 200 until May 2024, when it is forecast to drop to 86, compared to 147 which should be completed on time and meeting the 60 per cent target.

But documents also show that this target can only be achieved if the demand for assessments for an EHCP reduces.

The county council will focus on meeting needs "at the earliest opportunity", with more language and communication support for reception classes.

The county council's leader said before the meeting that, with access to appropriate support services at an earlier stage, families might not need to go down the road of getting an EHCP.

Cllr Tim Oliver (Conservative, Weybridge) said "looking through the other end of the telescope" could lead to "low level" support given earlier on and building a "more resilient, preventative system", as well as allocating funding to those already in the system.

He added: "I accept that it's a challenging process for parents. It's not really their first choice."

While the cabinet member education and learning, Cllr Clare Curran (Conservative, Bookham and Fetcham West), told Monday's meeting she was "really confident" the plan to catch up on overdue EHCPs was realistic and could be achieved. But she said it would be put under pressure if there were a "massive increase" in new requests coming forward, or if there were a large number of staff leaving roles, as happened in 2022.

Image - illustration from UNHCR CC

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## **Bloomin' marvellous for Epsom and Ewell**

6 October 2023



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Go Epsom Business Improvement District, and dedicated volunteers from across the borough were delighted to pick up a number of awards for Nonsuch Park, Epsom Town Centre and Ewell Village at this year's South & South East in Bloom awards.

For the first time, Nonsuch Park picked up two awards, a prestigious Gold Award for Large Conservation Area and a Silver Gilt Award for Heritage Park.

Judge **Peter Holman**, who is also Chairman of the South & South East in Bloom scheme, praised the efforts of the Nonsuch Voles Volunteering Group, and Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Operational Services and Countryside Team, who all work together for the overall benefit of the park.

Mr Holman said, "Woodland management, planting new trees and beds, and uncovering and restoring horticultural features all add value. Since my last visit, it's good to see progress and the natural areas of the park are an excellent example of what can be achieved to benefit wildlife."

Ewell Village kept its Silver Award status in the Large Village of the Year category and was congratulated on the efforts of the community volunteers who help maintain the Gertrude Longhurst Memorial Garden and Bourne Hall Park.

The council's work at Bourne Hall was also praised. The judges said, "With its historic grounds, Bourne Hall showed noticeable improvements to the area at the rear of the building, which now forms an outdoor extension to the café area. It is understood that planting to soften its appearance is planned along with a new children's play area. Adjacent to the pond, a new pollinators bed has been successfully planted and looked attractive.

"The Wheatsheaf public house was pleasing to see and welcoming. Also of note was the work at Gertie's garden."

Epsom Town Centre entered the Business Improvement District category and retained its Silver Award status. The judges noted the planting schemes in Rosebery Park, the 'Pocket Park' in South Street and the new planters outside TK Maxx, they were also impressed with the murals around the Town Centre and the Lidl Living Wall in Upper High Street.

Councillor **John Beckett**, Chair of the Environment Committee, said "I am pleased to see the hard work and dedication of the council, Go Epsom, businesses, residents and volunteers has been formally recognised at this year's South & South East in Bloom awards.

"Maintaining our standards by winning Silver Awards in Ewell Village and Epsom Town Centre again and improving on last year's awards tally by winning Gold and Silver Gilt for Nonsuch Park is a brilliant achievement.

"Plans are already being put in place for the borough to take part in Bloom next year. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who is committed to ensuring our borough is the best it can be for the local community, visitors and wildlife all year round."

**Karen Pengelly**, BID Manager at Go Epsom said, "Epsom is a lovely town, and the introduction of planters, murals and general greenery are welcome additions to our street scene. Visitors and local workers have commented on how much they appreciate the efforts of everyone involved in making Epsom look even better. Onwards and upwards for 2024 - there's always more to do!"

The awards were held at RHS Wisley on Friday 29 September 2023.

South & South East in Bloom is part of Britain in Bloom and runs annual competitions across the counties of Kent, Surrey, East & West Sussex, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, East & North Dorset and East Wiltshire.

Related reports:

Bloom awards for Epsom and Ewell (2022)

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## Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

6 October 2023



A 9 month delay in presenting a critical report about **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**'s handling of complaints was the subject of testy exchanges at a meeting of the Council's **Audit and Scrutiny Committee** on Thursday 28th September.

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**"Who will watch the watchmen?"** When the Audit and Scrutiny Committee of the Council is itself under scrutiny - who takes responsibility for that?

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The **Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman** (LGO) had written to the Chief Executive of the Council in July 2022. The letter stated: "during the year your council failed to respond in time to our correspondence during three investigations. On each occasion, we had to escalate the matter internally and were forced to consider issuing a witness summons and a public report for non-compliance. Such delays in our investigation undermine our role and can result in further distress to complainants."

Though the letter was available to the public on the Ombudsman's website the question asked at the 28th September meeting was why the committee, responsible for the scrutiny and review of the decisions and performance of the council, was not presented with the letter at either of its subsequent meetings of November 2022 and February 2023. It was finally presented at the meeting of April 2023.

The Chair of the 28th September 2023 meeting of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee was Councillor **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford). He repeated a written answer to the question which referred to a "work plan" that provided for the Ombudsman's communication to be presented at the April meeting.

The questioner was former Residents Association Councillor **Previn Jagutpal**, exercising his right to ask a question as a member of the public. He responded to the Chair's answer and stated that there was no such direction in any "work plan", copies of which he held on the desk in front of him.

Mr Jagutpal went on to heavily criticise the conduct of the matter and said "Why should residents of Epsom and Ewell have confidence in the transparency and effectiveness of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee when pivotal information, such as the 2022 LGO annual review, and perhaps other information over the last four years, is not being shared in a timely manner with the committee?"

He went on to label the committee "The bodge-it and secrecy committee".

In another procedural controversy, though permitted a supplementary question to his first one, Mr Jagutpal was denied a second question, even though, as Mr Jagutpal pointed out, there was plenty of time for the committee to deal with it. Exploiting a bizarre anomaly in the procedures he was permitted to make a statement during which he told the committee what his denied second question was! Namely, a question concerning a meeting between the Chief Executive of the Council and the LGO of April 2022. Thus, as Mr Jagutpal argued, the matter pre-dated the subject of his first question about the July 2022 LGO letter.

A lawyer for the Council advised the Chair that Mr Jagutpal was not permitted a second question. According to **Epsom and Ewell Times** research of the standing orders the rule appears to be:

"If a member of the public asks or wishes to ask more than one question, their second question (written or oral) shall be taken after all other individuals who wish to ask a question have been given the opportunity to do so."

There were no other members of the public lining up to ask questions at this meeting.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court Ward) raised a point of order and accused the Chair of plucking rules out of the air to silence a member of the public and protect the Council from scrutiny. He said "I just do not believe that that rule exists. However, more to the point I've noticed that every time Mr Jagutpal tries to ask a question that risks embarrassment for officers, or for yourself chair, some arcane rule is plucked out of the air to shut him down. It absolutely reeks of cover up and pettiness. What must residents think of a Residents Association Council using every trick in the book to keep residents in their place?"

The legal adviser intervened once more: "I've previously advised this committee as to my interpretation as monitoring officer that the current Constitution and the relevant Annex is to be read that way so my advice has been quite clear that's how we're operating."

Later in the meeting Cllr Ames weighed in again about the 9 month delay in disclosing the LGO's July 2022 critical letter. He said ""I think my question for you, chair, is when you received this letter, you must have looked at this letter. You must have thought things are going very badly wrong. I must put this before the audit and scrutiny committee at the next meeting rather than sit on it until April. I mean, surely, as a competent chair, you would look at that letter. It was expressly said in the letter to have been addressed to yourself, chair, and yet you sat on this report for something like nine

months.”

Cllr Bridger responded “We can assure you that nothing has been hidden or anything else. Yes I appreciate it should have been dealt with. However, the letter also goes to the chief executive and myself and other members. .... the report is available for everybody to see. Nothing’s hidden at all and from what I hear it’s almost as if everybody’s waiting for us to bring the report but everybody can see it.”

The committee was informed that the LGO has stated that the situation of communications between its office and the Council had much improved.

Related reports:

Local Audit meet: unexpectedly interesting...

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## Our Star shines on Epsom Playhouse

6 October 2023



This month **Epsom & Ewell Borough Council** has installed 90 solar panels on the roof of **Epsom Playhouse**. The panels will generate over 32,000 kWh of electricity annually, covering a third of the Playhouse’s current electricity usage and saving more than 6.9 tonnes of carbon each year. The project is part of the council’s **Climate Change Action Plan** which sets an ambitious target for council operations to be carbon neutral by 2035.

The council has already installed solar panels at its Operational Depot which have saved more than 35 tonnes of carbon to-date and currently provide 20% of the site’s energy. Further solar panel installations are in the pipeline, following feasibility studies. Additional carbon-saving measures include installing energy efficient lights in all council buildings, and purchasing energy from a green tariff that guarantees energy is supplied from renewable sources. There are also plans to replace streetlighting throughout the borough with energy efficient LED lights. This will be done in phases, with phase 1 completed by 31st March 2024.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s operational carbon footprint has reduced by 13% since 2019 when the council first began to measure it.

Councillor **John Beckett**, Chair of the Environment Committee, said “We’re absolutely committed to tackling climate change at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

“Climate change is not a standalone single issue for the council or the borough; it runs through a broad range of our activities and behaviours. We’re passionate about working with partners and our residents to lead the way to a more sustainable borough, and the installation of solar panels at Epsom Playhouse is one of a range of initiatives that contributes to this.”

More details about the Council’s Climate Change Action Plan can be found on the council website: <https://epsom-ewell.gov.uk/residents/climate-change>

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## Glyn students brighten the Borough

6 October 2023



**Epsom & Ewell Borough Council** and **Glyn School** have come together to transform an unused building on the site of the Upper High Street car park with a community mural funded through the Government’s Safer Streets initiative.

Ten local secondary school students recently worked in collaboration with the council and international graffiti artists

from **Positive Arts** to create a large scale mural celebrating the biodiversity within our borough. The artwork has dramatically improved the aesthetics of the building, which previously looked tired and in need of renovating.

Giving support to the project, Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, said: "It is a goal of the council to ensure that our natural environment is both celebrated and accessible to all. This project showcases how culture and creative practices can help to elevate the natural landscape of our borough in new and colourful ways.

"This type of project sits within the emerging Cultural Strategy for the council, which seeks to nurture and champion the creative talents within our community while increasing access to creativity for all to enjoy and engage with. The students' teamwork has also been extremely impressive and is something to be proud of".

**Julian Phethean** from Positive Arts said, "The young people were really determined to produce something they could be proud of and that's exactly what they achieved!

"All of the students worked well in a team, made a positive social impact, and displayed a high level of creativity, focus and drive."

A spokesperson for Glyn School said: "The students involved thoroughly enjoyed this unique experience to give back to the community in a very different way."

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## ULEZ compliant taxis for Epsom and Ewell

6 October 2023



Taxis in **Epsom and Ewell** will need to be ULEZ-compliant in order to get a licence despite concerns raised from drivers. All licences will be given, providing cabs meet the standards, on July 1st, 2026.

However, from January, 1st 2025, licences will not normally be renewed for diesel vehicles that do not meet Euro 5 standards.

The ULEZ criteria was put to drivers in a consultation by **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**, with some saying their business would be affected, and one driver saying people may stop going out because of increased taxi fares. The response said: "If you want a ghost of Christmas future take a look at Sutton. Sutton once had small and large nightclubs, a cinema and a range of both independent and chain pubs and restaurants. Epsom isn't booming, but it is starting to recover and is a great place to go out. It won't take much to ruin that."

As a result of the consultation, an additional six months was added to the original timeline, with diesel car licensing planned to change from July 2024, to help drivers "already struggling with the cost of living".

A meeting of the council's licensing and planning policy committee on Tuesday (September 26) agreed the changes, and heard from officers that some drivers were already replacing their cars, having held out to see if the ULEZ expansion would actually come in.

The zone was expanded in August, and now comes up to the border with five districts and boroughs in Surrey, of which one is Epsom and Ewell.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (Residents' Association, Ewell Village) said he welcomed that more time had been given for vehicles to be replaced, and cited supply chain issues after Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic.

He said having spoken to Uber drivers, he understood they had been told their vehicles would have to be electric in the future in order for them to continue to be on the app. He said the biggest change to emissions quality would be moving away from diesel and petrol to electric vehicles. The council would need to provide more electric charging points to achieve these aims, he added.

Cllr Woodbridge said: "I would support this council in doing what it can to accelerate the move towards electric."

One respondent warned about the impact on Epsom's "reasonable" nightlife if the cost of new vehicles was passed on to passengers and that people would "go out less or not at all".

While another responded with concerns about his limousine business, saying their Chrysler limousine was ULEZ compliant, while their Lincoln car was not. They said: "I'm a small business and heavily rely on being able to trade to pay my mortgage, childcare fees and every other bill I have which is quite substantial. If the policy excluded me from trading it would have a detrimental impact on me and my family's life.

"We are a service in high demand, so it would also have an impact on the public who want to use our service for their special occasions."

An officers' report into the policy said they had not been able to find any special exemption for limousines in Transport for London guidelines. They said there wasn't justification for a blanket exemption for such cars and recommended they be

looked at on a case-by-case basis when making a licensing decision.

On the timeline for the changes, officers said: “If the new standards are implemented too quickly it could result in significant hardship for the licensed trade, and if substantial numbers of licence holders leave the trade as a result of too fast an implementation, then this could affect service provisions, ultimately creating a risk to public safety.”

From January 1, 2025 the council will not renew licences for diesel vehicles not meeting or exceeding Euro 5 emission standards, and from From July 1, 2026 licences, including renewals, will only be granted to vehicles which meet the Petrol Euro 4 and Diesel Euro 6 standards, with some exceptions.

Specially adapted vehicles for wheelchairs users will be exempt, and those being used for home to school transport with a county council contract will get a one-year extension to both phases.

The policy was unanimously agreed by the committee, and will go to full council for agreement.

Related reports:

Stretching Epsom taxi ULEZ exemption

Emissions a taxing issue for Council

Image Google street view Epsom Station taxis

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## Drafting of Epsom and Ewell Local Plan “unpausing”?

6 October 2023



Tuesday 26th September Epsom and Ewell Borough Council’s Licensing and Planning Policy Committee met to decide whether to recommend to the Full Council to restart work on the submission of a new Local Plan for the Borough. The motion to do so was carried after a lengthy debate.

Chairing the committee Councillor **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) stated that following the Full Council decision of 22nd March to pause the work on the Local Plan if “unpaused” its submission for approval by the Government could be expected in May 2025.

A member of the public, who was not identified, opened the debate with the following detailed appraisal: “I am pleased to see from the 15th of June meeting of this committee’s agenda.... that you have now calculated the actual need for new dwellings. When you replace the out-of-date 2014 household projections with the more recent 2018 projections and exclude the flawed affordability uplift, this results in a much more realistic figure of 2664 new dwellings over the plan period.

“To comply with the current version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), you still need to begin with the standard method number of 10,368. However, it can be easily demonstrated that this number is unachievable in light of local constraints. The point where that version of the Local Plan went so horribly wrong was in selecting an arbitrary target of 5,400 new dwellings and rushing into sacrificing Greenfield and Greenbelt sites to bridge the gap between the identified 3,700 Brownfield sites and the council’s arbitrary target.

“If the council were to set a new dwelling target of 3,700 plus this 150 (West Park site), then that would result in a target that is 45% above the actual need for new dwellings over the plan period.

“If the council agrees to a target of 3,850 new dwellings with no development on Greenfield or Greenbelt sites, then I am confident that it will be possible to develop a Local Plan that is acceptable to local residents. Furthermore, the council would have a compelling rationale for why a target of 10,368 is not achievable given local constraints and that its proposed target is 45% more than the actual local need.

“If the planning inspector subsequently insists on developing some Greenfield or Greenbelt sites, then he or central government will be blamed by local residents rather than Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.”

Cllr **Muir** (Conservative Horton) a non-member of the committee was given three minutes to make a statement and said: “It is critical when deciding whether or not to unpause the local plan drafting process ... that council has clarity over the

objectives for the next draft and the key changes required to achieve those objectives. So, what do we need to decide before unpausing?

“The most controversial of the recommendations put forward in ...draft local plan was the proposal to build on the borough’s protected Greenbelt Land. Using the council’s figures, 84% of those who used the questionnaire to reply to the consultation were opposed to building on our protected Green Belt. ...The large majority [of] elected councillors, stood in May’s local elections on a platform of protecting the green belt. We are morally obliged to protect this land and the environment for future generations.

“How many houses do we need to build in Epsom? Epsom is already the most densely populated borough in the county. There has been discussion about the need to meet the government target calculated using the standard method. This is not a mandatory target. The published local plan proposals do not attempt to meet the target of 10,478 dwellings over the plan period. For context, this is more than three times the target in the Epsom annual 2007 plan and more than four times the need indicated using the government’s 2018 household growth projections. The plan instead included a target of 5,875 dwellings, although no calculation was provided to support this.

“NPPF paragraph 11 states, “Following strategic policy should provide the objectively assessed needs for housing unless the application of policies in this framework that protect land designated as Greenbelt, local Green Space, and areas at risk of flooding. These provide a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type, and distribution of development.” We in Epsom have exactly those strong reasons listed and should use them to protect the borough. The plan identified Brownfield sites that could accommodate 3,800 dwellings without any use of Greenfield Greenbelt sites. Importantly, using this figure as the housing target complies with the existing NPPF paragraph 11 and exceeds the housing need derived from the latest government data.

“In conclusion, I support the unpausing of the local plan if and only if we commit to the objectives of protecting our environment and green spaces through excluding development of the Greenfield Greenbelt sites and including realistic housing targets. And that this Council commits to speaking to large-scale developers to learn what can be done to address the alleged barriers put forward by this Council to pursuing the Kiln Lane and Longmead proposal.”

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) also spoke as a non-member of the committee and said:

“I very much do want to see houses built. We have a definitive lack of affordable housing, i.e., first-time buyer housing, ....., which our draft plan is not adequately addressing. Urban density on our Brownfield site should be increased with an aim for gentle urban density around six stories max. These units should be mainly single and double-bedroom apartments located within 20 minutes’ walk or cycle of existing infrastructure.

On these grounds, I would like to see the local plan unpaused with a recommendation to be enacted to increase urban density and remove the inappropriate Green Belt developments.”

Earlier **Cllr Julie Morris** (LibDem - College) suggested that if the motion was passed the next Full Council being scheduled for 12th December, she may make moves to convene an extraordinary Council to consider the proposal to “unpause” the Local Plan process on an earlier date, to avoid delay.

Six members of the eight strong committee voted in favour of the motion to recommend to the Full Council the unpausing of the drafting of the Local Plan.

*The Epsom and Ewell Times can confirm that Chairman of the Committee Steve McCormick has secured support from the requisite number of Councillors to convene an Extraordinary Meeting of the Full Council. Date to be confirmed but likely to be 24th October.*

Related Reports:

Motion to pause Local Plan process

Cllr McCormick’s own answers on Local Plan

Public meeting on Local Plan dominated by greenbelters.

Housing need or desire?

Can Epsom and Ewell get more dense?

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## Another Surrey Local Plan Pauses

6 October 2023



The towns, villages, and open spaces that will take the brunt of **Surrey Heath Borough Council’s** 6,000 new homes will

be kept under wraps a little longer after the local authority kicked its housing plan into touch.

It is the second time this year the council has paused its local plan after announcing in February it would hold off until after housing secretary **Michael Gove**'s long-rumoured but never seen planning changes take effect.

Now the council is blaming the "economic climate" and the need to develop a strategy for Camberley town centre - which has been hit by the £79 million loss in value of the Camberley Square and House of Fraser sites.

It has said it will now "review the timetable for the remaining stages of the Local Plan process, known as the Local Development Scheme".

Surrey Heath Portfolio Holder for sustainable transport and planning, Councillor Alan Ashbery said: "The council is committed to delivering the best local plan for our residents, while giving maximum protection to our highly valued green belt and special protection areas.

"Given the current economic climate, more time is required to review key policies and undertake further work to support the development in Camberley town centre. Once these important pieces of work have been completed, a new local development scheme will be published. This will set out dates for the remaining stages of the process, including publication details prior to submission to the Secretary of State."

The original draft in February was to deliver 6,213 homes up to the year 2038 - with more than 1,000 lined up for green belt sites. That left 2,700 homes, once those that had already been granted planning permission but had yet to be built were discounted.

The council's draft outlined where housing could be built - this includes employment, commercial, recreation and green spaces and was drawn up following consultation with residents and businesses in 2022.

After the February delay, it was due to submit a final draft for consideration in November 2023 but this has now been delayed again, the council said, to allow further work to be carried out.

Related reports:

**Gove: meddling and muddled over Surrey Local Plans?**

Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

Gove flexing his muscle on a Local Plan?

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Motion to pause Local Plan process (Epsom and Ewell)

Image: ffaalummi CC by ND 2

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## Gove: meddling and muddled over Surrey Local Plans?

6 October 2023



**Michael Gove** is a Surrey MP and the Cabinet Minister in charge of housing and planning. The progress of Local Plans across the County are in disarray. Local Plans set the framework for each Surrey Borough's planning policies, including housing, for years to come. The Independent Leader of Spelthorne Council in Surrey has taken on Gove in a fierce letter exposing the muddle in the Central Government's position. The draft Local Plan for Epsom and Ewell has been paused. Emily Coady-Stemp reports:

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The risk of flooding in Staines has been labelled a "major concern" by the council's leader, as she has hit back at a government intervention in planning for homes in the borough.

A last-minute intervention ahead of a key meeting this month saw a letter sent to the council saying **Michael Gove** directed the council not to withdraw its local plan.

The council nonetheless voted to pause its plan again, a move since approved by the government inspector allocated to it, and a response has been sent to the housing minister.

Councillor Joanne Sexton (Independent Spelthorne Group, Ashford East) said the authority, where she became leader after local elections in May 2023, had been preparing its plan for 9,000 homes in the borough through "an unprecedented period of instability in the planning system".

She said during this time "major reforms" were being proposed by central government "which seem to change with the

wind”.

Her letter to housing minister Rachel Maclean said the option of withdrawing the local plan was put forward at a meeting of the full council on Thursday September 14 because this may be a quicker way to get a plan through, rather than carry on with examination of the current draft.

Hearings into the plan started in May this year, but were paused in June while the council brought new members up to speed. Opening hearings heard concerns about the impact that putting more than half of the new planned homes in Staines would have on the market town.

Cllr Sexton said in her letter: “I, along with local members, also have a major concern in relation to potential flood risk in Staines which is where over 50 per cent of our new homes are planned to be provided.” She said an outstanding statement of common ground from the Environment Agency on flooding concerns could still end up being “a key issue of soundness”, the term inspectors use to say if they think a plan will or won’t work. She also asked why a timeline for policy changes that are due from central government has still not been published.

Cllr Sexton attached a list of more than 60 local planning authorities that have now paused or withdrawn their local plans “as a result of this chaos and mixed messaging”. She asked if the minister was “mistaken” when she declared in her letter that Spelthorne would be left with one of the oldest local plans in the country and highlighted other areas where the Secretary of State had not intervened, including in Basildon and Castle Point.

On Spelthorne not being left with one of the oldest plans in the country, Cllr Sexton asked: “If you concede this point, does it follow that you should rescind the intervention or is it your intention to intervene in the other councils with plans older than 2009?”

The local plan is the latest in Surrey to run into issues, with Tandridge set to put an end to its plan despite having spent £3.5m on it, and having first submitted it to government in 2019.

Cllr Sexton “took issue” with the last-minute nature of the letter from government, which came less than four hours before the meeting took place. She said: “This is completely unreasonable and unacceptable. At the very least you could have formally advised us earlier that you were minded to intervene so that we would have had the opportunity to understand and respond to your concerns ahead of the council meeting.”

She said the council would seek further legal advice on the intervention, and would send a “more detailed formal response” on the intervention in due course.

Referring to what she called a “total disparity” in the approach, Cllr Sexton also referred to a letter sent in April to Kwasi Kwarteng, Spelthorne’s MP.

In that letter, Ms Maclean said the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was unable to discuss the details of Spelthorne’s plan in order for the examination of the plan to “remain fully independent”.

Cllr Sexton said: “You are saying that you are unable to discuss the plan, but can unceremoniously intervene and stop the council deciding their own fate regarding the plan? Can you please explain the total disparity here?”

In his response agreeing to a further pause, the inspector, Jameson Bridgwater, asked the council to address issues he had raised at the hearings “in particular flood risk and its potential implications” on sites where homes may be built.

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[Motion to pause Local Plan process \(Epsom and Ewell\)](#)

Image: Joanne Sexton Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, (Ashford East), at the council building in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp and Michael Gove.

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## Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

6 October 2023



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But he also highlighted his reasons he thought it was important to get a report from the inspector.

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

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

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

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## Costs through the roof enquiry for local Council

6 October 2023



Epsom and Ewell's Poole Road Pavilion re-roof costs go through the roof. The Strategy and Resources Committee Epsom and Ewell Council met September 21 to authorize the extra costs.

The tenders received exceeded the allocated budget. An extra £105,000 from the capital receipts reserve is needed to cover the increased costs.

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) stated he did not object to the proposal in principle but raised a concern. "The three tenders all come in suspiciously close and all above the manufacturers estimate. This seems to be the trend in local authorities. We get a lowball estimate. And then when the tenders come in, we find that they're significantly more." He questioned why the estimate was so far off the mark, resulting in a cost that is over a third more than originally anticipated.

The Council's Senior Surveyor responded to concerns about cost estimates and tenders. He explained that prices can vary significantly in the current market due to factors like energy and transportation costs. In this case, the manufacturer may have provided a lower estimate, contributing to the cost discrepancy. "I don't think it's because we're a council. It's just the way it is in the market."

Cllr **Alan Williamson** (RA West Ewell) was also concerned about the substantial increase in cost for the roofing repairs. "That's quite a big discrepancy on the original estimation."

The Head of Finance explained that the reason for bringing the roofing project cost increase back to the committee is the significant change in costs. "It's right that you as members should consider whether, at the increased cost of a quarter of a million, you still think it's a viable scheme that the council should progress."

"In this particular instance, I think I was given some dodgy advice from the manufacturer. So apologies for that," he said.

Cllr **Shanice Goldman** (RA Nonsuch) asked about the process for evaluating estimates. "Do we use our own internal expertise to kind of look at that and check the validity of estimates that we've been given?" As she understood it, the original amount of £150,000 was agreed upon just nine months ago in January, rather than two years ago.

The officer responded: "The process for the capital bidding starts two years before. So when you're getting the estimates together, by the time we get on site, it is virtually two years past." He also added they relied on the manufacturer's estimate for the cost, and while they usually expect estimates to be higher, they couldn't have foreseen the extent of this particular cost increase.

Cllr Goldman sought assurance that the council will take steps to ensure the accuracy of the data provided for decision-making. She said "It's quite difficult for members to make a vote or to vote on matters where the data isn't accurate." She asked for improvements in the estimation process to enable members to make informed decisions based on reliable information.

Cllr **Hannah Dalton**, the Vice-Chair of the Committee, (RA Stoneleigh) recommended that an internal audit look at this particular procurement to allay any member's concerns around it.

The additional funding for the project was approved as was the recommendation that an internal audit review of the procurement process take place.

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On the Council's IT strategy Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) raised questions regarding the council's carbon reduction target, emphasizing the need to avoid greenwashing practices and ensure that suppliers can demonstrate their commitment to carbon reduction. She asked, "How are we as a council going to avoid falling into that trap? And will the suppliers be expected to explain how they meet carbon reduction neutrality? And what weight would be put on these when choosing the preferred supplier?"

The Head of IT, highlighted the importance of incorporating metrics like Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) into their procurement process as they shift to cloud-based services. "We will be looking to include a number of metrics within our procurement.....in particular, as we move to cloud-based services."

Cllr Kelly also inquired about the reuse and disposal of old equipment. "I want to know what consideration has been given to the reuse and disposal of old equipment. Will this perhaps be indicated in later report?"

The officer expressed willingness to consider requests for equipment reuse and mentioned interactions with recycling companies and charities for equipment recycling. "I'm happy to receive any requests from councillors where they've potentially got a use for equipment," The Council also receives inquiries from recycling companies, some of which offer free services. Additionally, there are charities, both local and in the southern region, that aim to recycle equipment for use in schools and further education.

The discussion then shifted to the reskilling of current staff members to adapt to new IT strategies.

The officer highlighted the Council's training plans. "Within our Microsoft Enterprise Agreement, there is a free training suite, and we are working our way through that to actually develop a learning plan for individual staff." He also added that this learning plan is designed to help individual staff members acquire new skills and knowledge.

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court Ward) raised questions about the factors affecting residents' ability to adapt to service changes. "I think there maybe a larger number of factors that might lead some people to have difficulty in channel shift."

On the Household Support Fund, Cllr **Neil Dallen** (Committee Chair - RA Town) explained the urgent need for funding to support vulnerable residents. The item proposed to continue the partnership with the Good Company, a local charity that runs the local food bank, Epsom Pantry, and the Epsom Refugee Network.

The last two items on the agenda, included the Commercial Tenant Update and the Commercial Property Update were

discussed in private as they “pertain (ed) to information related to the financial or business affairs of specific individuals or entities.”

## Painting a rosy picture for recycling

6 October 2023



A pioneering paint re-use shop at the Guildford community recycling centre (CRC), operated on behalf of **Surrey County Council**, launched in 2021 has successfully diverted over 15,500 litres of reusable paint from disposal, raising over £2,000 for **Macmillan Cancer Support** and supporting community projects through the **Surrey Probation Service**.

An estimated 55 million litres of paint are wasted in the UK annually, enough to fill 22 Olympic swimming pools. In autumn 2021, the team at SUEZ, who operate 15 community recycling centres (CRC) on behalf of Surrey County Council, set out to address this problem locally with a circular economy initiative to divert useable paint away from disposal.

To address this issue at the local level, the team at SUEZ opened a paint re-use shop in Guildford where tins of reusable, water-based paint brought to the recycling centre are set aside for residents to have for free, with a suggested donation to Macmillan Cancer Support. In 2023, the team was able to divert even more paint away from disposal by partnering with the Staines Probation Office, providing free paint for use in community projects - up to 200 litres at a time.

Now, nearly two years into operation, the paint shop has diverted over 15,500 litres of paint away from disposal, raised over £2000 for Macmillan and supported more than five community projects through the probation service.

The paint re-use shop offers an eco-friendly alternative to disposal, contributing to charitable causes and supporting meaningful rehabilitation for individuals on probation. The initiative also aligns economic efficiency with environmental responsibility by generating cost savings for Surrey County Council.

**Natalie Bramhall, Cabinet Member for Property and Waste said:** “This programme has been a huge success over the last two years and helped divert a significant amount of waste from landfill. To be recognised and shortlisted for a National Recycling Award is great to hear.”

**Gareth Swain, Regional Manager for SUEZ recycling and recovery UK said:** “When we opened the paint re-use shop in late 2021, we set out to reduce the need for disposal and demand for new paint production by transforming waste paint into a community resource. We are incredibly proud of how the project has grown through the partnership with the probation service and we are honoured to be recognized by this year’s National Recycling Awards.”

**Peter Nicholls, Placement Coordinator for the Staines Probation Office of HM Prison & Probation Service said:** “The paint donations from SUEZ have made such a difference to all corners of our community, from Scouting to Schools, charities, and homes for vulnerable people in Surrey to name just a few. The projects that we have completed did not have funding for supplies. It is important work and important for our role in rehabilitating and educating people on probation.”

## Gove gives Tandridge a severe telling off

6 October 2023



An “extremely vulnerable person” with poor mental health suffered “aggressive” and “intimidating” behaviour at the hands of **Tandridge District Council** staff.

The unacceptable behaviour has led to the secretary of state for communities, **Michael Gove**, to write to the council to

formally warn that he be taking “a personal interest” in how it delivers for residents.

Levelling Up secretary Michael Gove wrote to the local authority after an investigation by the local government watchdog found the behaviour of a housing officer amounted to severe maladministration.

According to the **housing ombudsman’s** report, the resident as well as an independent mental health advocate said the housing officer’s approach was “aggressive and intimidating” and that “she had never been spoken to in that manner in all her years in the role”.

This carried on until the housing officer left three months later.

The ombudsman ordered the council to apologise to the resident in person, pay £1,000 in compensation and review its Vulnerabilities and Reasonable Adjustment policies.

Mr Gove, writing to Tandridge Council’s chief executive David Ford in August 2023, said: “I write following a finding of severe maladministration by the Housing Ombudsman for your failure to abide by duties under the Equality Act 2010 or act in accordance with your own safeguarding policy. In this case you failed an extremely vulnerable resident.

“Her case was not referred immediately, as it should have been, to the relevant support services. The behaviour of a member of your staff towards both the resident and the mental health advocate supporting the resident was described as aggressive, intimidating and neither appropriate nor solution focused.

“This is not acceptable. Your residents should expect their concerns to be taken seriously, for reasonable adjustments to be made where appropriate, and that an investigation of any complaint should be fair. Residents, particularly those who are vulnerable, should expect that their needs are understood and acted upon.”

He added: “I will take a personal interest in how you deliver your responsibilities to your residents.”

**Richard Blakeway**, housing ombudsman, said: “At the heart of this case, there were three different officers involved, but none took appropriate action. Failure to appropriately respond to the resident’s requests for reasonable adjustments or to act in accordance with its own safeguarding policy caused serious detriment.

“The failure by the landlord to demonstrate that it had taken steps to ensure it understood the needs of the resident also led to missed opportunities which adversely impacted the resident. On top of this, there was a complete absence of recognition, acknowledgement or apology from the landlord for its failings, or to take any action to put things right.”

Responding to Mr Gove was Councillor **Catherine Sayer**, leader of Tandridge District Council. She said they recognised there were problems in how the council dealt with the long-running case, which stretched over several years, and that they failed to fully consider the resident’s needs and vulnerabilities.

Cllr Sayer said: “We are sincerely sorry for the distress and inconvenience caused. Compensation was paid to the resident and we continue to work with and support them with their future needs.

“In January 2023, the Ombudsman did acknowledge several reasonable adjustments were made during the handling of the case.” She said the council had also learned from its mistakes and will put all customer-facing staff into refresher training on safeguarding, vulnerability, equality and diversity and requirements for reasonable adjustments.

Among the changes the council has since made include a staffing structure review as part of a council-wide programme to ensure a dedicated housing officer is assigned to a case and that each case is reviewed monthly by senior officers.

Tandridge Council has also appointed a resident engagement manager to oversee supporting those with vulnerabilities. Cllr Sayer added: “In addition, we made a referral to the Regulator for Social Housing who was satisfied with the response and action we have taken and they did not require us to take any further action.”

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## Surrey’s smokescreen over Fire Service failings

6 October 2023



Dear Editor,

Last week saw the publication of His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Report of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

The accompanying press release from the Conservative Leaders of SCC headlined the fact that the “Inspectors praised our fire and rescue service’s cultural improvements and the positive behaviours that were demonstrated during their visit”. Residents might therefore be forgiven if they were to think that the Inspection Report itself was something to celebrate.

However, the HMICFRS Report makes 11 judgments on the Fire Service in Surrey and, of the 11 areas inspected, just one is good and the rest judged as adequate and below.

Under the watch of the Conservatives in Surrey, key factors relating to keeping our residents safe; preventing fire and risk, public safety through fire regulation, responding to fires and emergencies and the best use of resources, all require improvement. And seven of the 11 judgments show the service as less than adequate.

Crucially, our Fire Service Officers are also being failed, with the Inspectors reporting concerns over the lack of adequate training for incidents in tall buildings, failures to identify high-risk premises and delays to the upgrade of vehicles.

Worryingly, the Inspectors also say, “We were disappointed to find that the service hadn’t made the progress we expected since our 2021 inspection”.

The lack of openness regarding the Inspection outcomes is unacceptable. However, far more serious are those judgments themselves. In a letter to the Cabinet Member for Communities and Community Safety I have called for a plan to turn this situation around, to be formulated as a matter of urgency. Our residents, our local businesses and our Fire Officers deserve much better than this.

Yours faithfully,

**Eber Kington**

Surrey County Councillor (Residents Association - Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington).

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Related reports:

[Surrey Fire service praised](#)

[Not such a rosy report on Surrey Fire Service](#)

Image: Councillor Eber Kington

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## Another Surrey Borough with serious money problems

6 October 2023



**Epsom and Ewell Times** has reported on the woes of Woking, the gaps in Guildford budgets and we have spelt out the thorny financial crisis of Spelthorne. Now Surrey Heath may move to asbestos lined offices to preserve its existence. These crises contrast with **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** that consistently balances its books. **Chris Caulfield** reports:

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**Surrey Heath Borough Council** could close its headquarters and move into the vacant, asbestos-lined House of Fraser site as it tries to get out from under its “existential crisis” of its “sheer levels of borrowing”.

It comes as the council’s leader **Shaun Macdonald** said the borough was as little as two years away from effective bankruptcy.

The council is seeking ways to cover its £176m debts and has launched a project to look into the relocation of civic offices – and papers published as part of its Thursday, September 14, performance and finance scrutiny committee suggest it is considering moving staff into the vacant House of Fraser building in Camberley.

Surrey Heath Borough Council bought the House of Fraser building in 2016 for £18m. The store closed its doors in May 2023 with the lease expiring in August 2023.

Today the building is said to be worth just £2.9m and requires “multiple millions of pounds” to refurbish. House of Fraser closed the branch in Park Street in May.

The council says it has been working on alternative plans for the building, “including complete modernisation and refurbishment, improved retail and hospitality areas, offices and community facilities such as health and civic uses”.

According to council documents, it has been negotiating with commercial tenants for the entirety of the third floor, as well as the entirety of the ground floor, and half of the first floor.

“The second floor could be a potential location for Surrey Heath Borough Council’s relocated office and the remaining half

of the first floor for a relocation of Surrey County Council's library."

It could make the move as early as 2026.

Commenting on the council's treasury management activity report during the same meeting, Councillor **Richard Wilson** (LD, Bagshot) said: "It seems pretty obvious that the council has effectively an existential challenge because of just the sheer level of borrowing we've got. "This all stems back to 2016 when those failures in decision making on oversight and scrutiny but I wonder if there has also been a failure in treasury management in the period after 2016 while interest rates were still low?"

He also asked whether the loans could have been handled in a "different" way the council could have avoided the "existential crisis" it has now.

Details of the potential move were published as part of the council's property and economic development service performance report.

A spokesperson for the council said: "In common with many buildings of this age, asbestos is contained in the fabric of the former House of Fraser building, which is safe if not disturbed. "This would need to be removed by specialist contractors as part of any future plans."

House Of Fraser Camberley (Image: Google Street View)

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Guildford contemplates financial "Armageddon".

Spelthorne's neediest lose out on housing

Spelthorne's thorny property problems spelt out

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## Gove flexing his muscle on a Local Plan?

6 October 2023



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cllr Sexton said unresolved flood issues in Staines, a plan that delivered "beautiful places" and with the "communities at the heart of it" were some of the concerns and reasons behind the plan that would be made clear to the government.

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

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

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

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

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

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