

# Meet Epsom & Ewell's new Mayor, Robert Geleit.

24 June 2023



Epsom and Ewell Times welcomes the new Mayor. Labour Councillor for Court Ward, **Robert Geleit**.

**EET:** The main thing I wanted to discuss was charities, I see that you are championing three charities in your Mayoral year, could you expand upon why you chose those particular charities?

**Robert Geleit:** I chose to champion these three charities because I want to help make sure each one of them receives sufficient funds to be able to carry on what they are doing so they can continue positively impacting our community.

**Age Concern Epsom and Ewell** was an easy choice because of the essential services they offer our pensioners: practical support, help in accessing services and opportunities to increase quality of life.

**Citizens Advice Epsom and Ewell** have faithfully continued to offer desperately needed advice services in the Borough. I have seen personally the impact it has had in Court Ward as volunteers advise people how to access benefits they qualify for, how to best seek employment, how to deal with money and credit issues, their consumer rights, immigration issues and how best to tackle relational issues with neighbours or family (or anyone else). Often people don't know where to start when it comes to tackling these things and CAEE is a wonderful resource.

Last, how could I not support **Love Me Love My Mind**? They are a small local charity offering support to those in our community with mental health difficulties, including providing information, offering depression support groups and a drop-in group that offers a weekly meal and all sorts of social and educational opportunities. I have suffered with mental health problems myself, so mental health support is near and dear to my heart.

**EET:** Next question I wanted to ask was what are your priorities for your year in office?

**Robert Geleit:** I so enjoyed my year as Deputy Mayor and I'm enjoying being Mayor even more. I want to work hard serving the borough and have fun! I intend to be promoting the ward I represent as Councillor, Court Ward, since it has a lot to offer. And I really want to offer young people in Epsom something to do that builds and grows positive community. Watch this space!

**EET:** What do you think could be improved about the Borough?

**Robert Geleit:** Youth provision. When I was growing up on the Longmead Estate in the eighties there were all number of offerings for us. I remember the Ace Disco in particular. Now there is so little offered for our youth. This needs to change. There must be more we can do.

**EET:** What are you most looking forward to in your new role?

**Robert Geleit:** I'm really looking forward to Armistice day. Last year I had the privilege of laying a wreath at St Martins and found it really moving. This year, to have the opportunity as Mayor to lay a wreath at St Mary's in Ewell is going to be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

**EET:** If you were just named Fulham's manager, who is the first player you would sign?

**Robert Geleit:** I really don't follow sport. But, like my father who was a lifelong Fulham supporter, I do go to Craven Cottage on the odd occasion. If I had to sign a player I think I'd sign up my mate Dodgy to play in goal for Chelsea just before they played Fulham - then he could be Fulham's secret weapon as he let in loads of goals!

**EET:** What hobbies of yours might suffer during your busy Mayoral year?

**Robert Geleit:** So much of my spare time has been spent on being a good Councillor (or Mayor!) that I don't have much time for hobbies. However, in the past I tended to flip between working on hardware and software projects. Sometimes I still manage to find the time for the odd bit of soldering. My main passion is working with old fashioned valves to create sublime sound systems - I could actually make a living out of it but I'm saving that for if I ever lose my seat ☐

**EET:** Thank you very much Mr Mayor. We hope you enjoy your year in office.

Related Reports:

Epsom and Ewell's 7th Labour Mayor?

Meet Epsom & Ewell's new Mayor, Clive Woodbridge. (2022-2023)

Image: Robert Geleit at the Epsom Derby Races June 2023.

# Surrey Council ‘blamed me as a parent’ after asking for help

24 June 2023



A mother of an (Special Educational Needs) SEN child claims **Surrey County Council** “blamed her” as a parent after she asked for help and support, according to a local government watchdog report.

The revelation came in reports published this month by the **Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman**, which also found the authority’s failings caused a second child to miss suitable education for a year, and that a boy had to be held back a year after it failed to identify his special educational needs.

The three cases meant the county council had to pay out a total of £4,900 to the aggrieved families. Surrey County Council said it apologises for the distress it has caused and has put in “robust” auditing measures to learn from its mistakes.

The first case dates back to April 2021 when a mother, referred to as Mrs X raised a complaint about the lack of support the council offered her as well as the actions of two social workers. She said the council failed to offer help , including respite to her and her child. She also said the council blamed her as a parent and recorded false information about her in the social care records.

The ombudsman said there was “fault in the council’s actions” but that the local authority had already remedied the injustice when it offered her £100 for its delay and £400 to recognise the distress. He did not take the matter further.

The council’s costliest error came after a father complained that his son was not receiving full-time education between April 2021 to March 2022. The council’s lack of action, the ombudsman found, was because it “simply overlooked” key information resulting in the boy missing out on education, causing the family distress and uncertainty.

The ombudsman found Surrey County Council at fault and recommended it apologise for the harm done as well as pay £200 for the time and trouble, £300 for distress and £2,200 for missed education and SEN provision.

The final finding against the council involved its delays in identifying a boy’s special educational needs and finding an appropriate school for him. The delay meant he missed eight months of education and was held back a year. It resulted in the ombudsman ordering the council to apologise to the mother and child for the distress caused by its failure to provide the boy with an appropriate education.

Surrey was also told to pay the mother £1,500 as a symbolic gesture to recognise the distress and impact on the youngster’s wellbeing and personal development. It must also pay the mother £200 for the frustration and distress caused to her.

Surrey County Council’s cabinet member for education and learning, Councillor **Clare Curran** said they took ombudsman findings very seriously and apologised for the distress caused. She said: “I am aware that the council has not always got things right and that the support and service that we give some children with additional needs and their families is not always of the standard that we would expect and I am sorry about that. We are working hard to improve our services.”

Cllr Curran said they had put in a programme of ongoing professional development for education staff as well as what she described as a “robust audit system”. She said: “All SEN case officers are required to attend Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) writing training, which clearly sets out the local authority’s duties, and additional guidance has been written for staff to reiterate these duties.

“Further bespoke training around writing EHCPs will be delivered and be a requirement for all SEN staff when joining Surrey. We also recognise the significant issues that confront the SEND system nationally. We have seen a 64 per cent increase in education, health and care needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, at a time of a national shortage of Educational Psychologists (EPs).

“We are doing our utmost to recruit more to meet this demand, and we are filling this gap as best we can, but we hope to see the shortage in trained EPs and other issues addressed soon through the government’s improvement plan. We remain committed to improving our services and outcomes for children with additional needs so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future.”

Related reports:

[Council pays £3,900 to mother of SEND child](#)

Surrey County failed SEND boy  
Surrey to SEND £40m for special schools

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## County CEO's pay rise triggering strikes?

24 June 2023



A pay offer giving **Surrey County Council's** chief executive almost 10 times more than the authority's lowest paid workers has prompted a strike action ballot.

Social workers, teaching assistants and bin collectors are among the thousands of county council staff voting on industrial action. It's over a pay offer public sector union Unison says falls far short of covering the increase in the cost of living.

**UNISON's** Surrey county branch secretary **Paul Couchman** said: "After years of below-inflation pay increases and with the soaring cost of living, staff are struggling. There's still no end in sight to spiralling bills and staff feel strongly that enough is enough. It's not too late for the council to think again and improve its pay offer."

According to the union about nine in 10 members rejected the county council's offer which it said would increase the overall wage bill by 5 per cent.

If accepted it would have worked out as an additional £1,300 and £1,700, to low-paid staff with the chief executive **Joanna Killian's** £234,600 salary topped up by up to £10,000, the union said.

Surrey County Council leader **Tim Oliver**, said the council recognised the financial pressures people were living under and labelled the decision to turn down the pay increase "disappointing".

He said: "That's why we have worked really hard to find extra money for staff pay this year, increasing our offer to make sure that for the second year running we are focussing the largest percentage increases on our lowest paid employees to reflect the increased costs staff are facing day by day.

"This years' offer is between 7.8 per cent for the lowest grades, and 4.5 per cent on the highest, with a Surrey minimum wage of £11.05 per hour -15p per hour higher than the Real Living Wage. This represents an increase of 16.3 per cent over the past two years for staff on the very lowest pay grades, and is in addition to a one-off lump sum payment for business mileage and a Real Living Wage adjustment for lower paid staff paid in January this year.

"However, it's imperative that the offer is within our means. The council is not immune to the challenges of the current economic landscape, rising costs and inflation pressures. Put simply everything is more expensive for us to buy as a council too, and we must ensure we remain in a position to deliver vital public services and protect the most vulnerable in our communities throughout. It's within this context that discussions will continue, and we will be reviewing our next steps accordingly."

Addressing the increase to the CEO's salary a spokesperson for the council said that its focus was on providing the best possible services to 1.2m residents of Surrey, and to ensure it does this, needs to have the best people in senior positions.

They said: "The scale of our work means we employ 10,000 staff, and have an annual budget of £1bn, and in order to attract the best people from both the public and private sector for this, we need to offer competitive salaries."

Image: Julian Killian SCC CEO. Credit: User:Dollfusguy CC BY-SA 4.0

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## Surrey's "Tugs in Space!"

24 June 2023



Thanks to £250,000 of government funding announced today, a new type of electric space propulsion system will be developed by the **University of Surrey** in partnership with the University of Leicester. The new thruster would be used to service and reposition satellites in space via agile space tugs.

The **PLAsma Torch Rocket** (PLATOR) project will fill a gap in current propulsion options, offering a balance between the high thrust typical of chemical propulsion engines and the propellant efficiency of electrical propulsion ones.

The project has been awarded £250,000 from the **UK Space Agency's** Enabling Technologies programme.

**Dr Andrea Lucca Fabris**, Senior Lecturer in Electric Propulsion at the University's Surrey Space Centre and project lead, said:

"Our PLATOR rocket could be used as the main way to move spacecraft after launch, or it could be used in space transportation vehicles, or space tugs, for delivering satellites to specific orbital slots, refuelling satellites to prolong their service life and removing space debris."

As well as designing the propulsion system, the project will explore potential uses for PLATOR through flight dynamics simulations, identify the optimal size and design of space tugs and, in partnership with researchers at the University of Leicester, develop a piloting system.

Dr **Nicola Baresi**, Lecturer in Astrodynamics at the University's Surrey Space Centre and project co-Investigator, added:

"PLATOR will increase the options available to mission planners and could be particularly useful when the UK develops its own launch capability. UK launches will only be able to reach high-inclination orbits, but our proposed space tugs could hopefully expand their reach, opening the door to new and exciting mission opportunities from the UK soil"

**Surrey Space Centre** is where the era of small, low-cost satellites began with the successful spin-out company SSTL. Today, Surrey Space Centre is a world-leading academic centre of excellence for space engineering research and education which regularly leads on experimental orbital payloads. Surrey Space Centre is globally renowned for its Space Engineering education courses at Masters and Undergraduate level. It is part of the Space South Central regional cluster.

The PLATOR project will make the most of the advanced vacuum facilities and instrumentation in the Space Propulsion Laboratory at Surrey Space Centre.

Image: An artist's impression of PLATOR: Oliver Hitchens, University of Surrey.

Surrey University Press Office

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## The knives are out in Woking

24 June 2023



The Epsom and Ewell Times has covered the bankruptcy of Woking Council. Recently we have received daily updates from our partners at the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service but spared you from the flood. This report, however, demonstrates the importance of a vibrant quality local media. The baffling commitments that were made by Woking are unlikely to be made by our Epsom and Ewell Borough Council. Nevertheless, a free press reporting on Council business is an important contribution to sensible decision making. Chris Caulfield reports:

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Woking Borough Council's bankruptcy crisis is so insane the authority even agreed to be responsible for "buying the Hilton Hotel's cutlery".

It is the first of many revelations to come as the authority agreed to an "asset disposal strategy" as part of its efforts to cut into its £2.6billion projected debt on Tuesday (June 20).

Many eyes were immediately drawn to the council's flagship town centre development in Victoria Square - a central driver behind the council's £1.2bn deficit.

But the recent news that it had been written down in value to almost half what it cost to build means it is unlikely to be sold at a massive loss straight away. It's the assets inside the building that made many drop their spoons.

Addressing the extraordinary council meeting was borough leader Cllr Ann-Marie Barker. She said: "Let's have a look at a couple of projects. Victoria Square going from £150 million to £460m to £700m. Huge difference in the scale of what went on there. Huge changes to the project as it went through. Much that wasn't known by opposition councillors as that project developed.

“I found out at a very late stage that Woking Council was responsible for buying all of the cutlery for the Hilton Hotel. That was where the hotel was run, we’ve got to buy all the stuff that goes inside there. It just seems quite astonishing that that was the approach and how much responsibility and risk the council has taken on. That’s where the huge issues lie.”

The opening of the Hilton Hotel, part of the Victoria Square development, is already about three years overdue. It was originally set for completion in November but the pandemic and other delays pushed this back 16 months. Later remedial work to address cladding issues added another 20 months on to the opening date.

Meanwhile the knives and forks have sat unused in drawers.

Cllr Barker added: “To get things under control you have to understand the totality of the problem.”

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## Prevention costs less than cures.....

24 June 2023



Opinion by County Councillor **Eber Kington**:

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It goes without saying that, if local councils prevent something untoward happening, that will save the higher costs of repairing the damaged caused. Fill in the potholes quickly and damage to vehicles and bigger potholes is prevented. Build the flood defences, and you do not have deal with the physical and emotional costs of lost homes and possessions.

And what applies to tarmac, bricks and riverbanks also applies to our young children and families. Ensure they have a good start, and you avoid the higher costs of intervention and support in later years. That might seem obvious, but I am not sure that **Surrey County Council**, with its responsibilities for children and families really understands that.

Many **Family Centres** were closed by the Conservative administration in 2019 on the basis that SCC would target those most in need. But Family Centres, with its universal provision and encouragement of all to attend, were designed to ensure that families did not fall into need in the first place. A strategy focussing only on those that have already met the threshold for support is neither preventative nor sound.

In this year’s Budget, the ruling group decided against even an inflationary increase in budget for the supportive and therapeutic **Short Breaks Services for Children** with SEND and their families. This was despite the Council’s own the **Equality Impact Assessment** telling them that:

*“Any reductions in capacity of short breaks services due to either or both inflation linked price increases [or] reduced current levels of investment .....are likely to: reduce positive outcomes for children with disabilities and their families; and increase pressure within families of children with disabilities, which is likely to, in some cases, contribute to family breakdown if this is not mitigated - leading to increased cost for the local authority”*

Short Breaks is a service that makes a real preventative difference, and even a standstill budget is likely have future financial consequences. And SCC continues to fail some of our most challenged young people in another way. Support for them comes, in part, through the development of an EHCP (**Education, Health and Care Plan**) within their school setting. But SCC has a backlog of 937 new applications which, at the current rate of action, will take until March 2024 to clear.

I understand that there are pressures, with more young people in need of an EHCP, and those with the expertise to develop them not readily available. But, all the while there are children whose needs are not being met, the longer-term costs of meeting their educational needs are rising.

SCC has to value and fund preventative services, and **Residents Association** and Independent Councillors are committed to highlighting the removal and reduction of those preventative services when that happens.

However, we are also seeking to work positively with the ruling administration to ensure that Surrey’s children and families get the best start in life and that the balance of funding between prevention and cure starts to be more clearly tipped in favour of the former.



County Councillor Eber Kington (RA Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington)

Top image: Epsom Family Centre within Pound Lane School.

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## Stretching Epsom taxi ULEZ exemption

24 June 2023



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's **Licensing and Planning Policy Committee** decided Thursday 15th June to put out to public consultation a change to licensing requirements for taxis seeking operating licences from the Council. The change will require applicants' vehicles to meet the ULEZ charge exemption criteria as set by the Mayor of London for the ULEZ zone. That zone is due to be expanded to Epsom and Ewell's London Borough borders (i.e., the boroughs of Sutton and Kingston) on 31st August this year.

Cllr **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) welcomed any measure that pursued the Council's climate change agenda but was concerned on the devastating impact the requirement may have on some drivers. She gave as an example a driver near retirement who could not afford to change his vehicle. Is there discretion she asked?

An officer said all policies had to have some discretion or legal challenges could be made. However, he did not address the example given but mentioned the large Cadillac limousine he had seen recently. The Mayor of London's ULEZ policy has some exceptions to cater for such special party cab-hires.

Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) in the chair stated that the draft policy would be open to amendment in the light of responses to the consultation and the matter would be returning for decision by the committee on a future occasion.

Related reports:

Emissions a taxing issue for Council

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## Pause for thought on paused Plan

24 June 2023



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Licensing and Planning Policy Committee reviewed the state of play with the Draft Local Plan at a meeting Thursday 15th June.

The progression of the Draft Local Plan (the framework for local planning decisions of the future) was paused in March following an outcry about its Green Belt development proposals. Michael Gove MP, the Secretary of State responsible for planning matters, is yet to deliver on the clarifications sought to his pre-May local election indications that local authorities would have greater control over housing targets.

The meeting was chaired by Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) who advised that EEBC was bound by the housing target of 573 houses per annum as extrapolated from 2014 data. A report to the meeting confirmed that if 2018 data was relied on that target would be reduced to 253.

Officers reported on the workstreams continuing on the Draft Local Plan. These included the vetting of the 1650 responses from individuals and organisations received during the public consultation period of the now paused Draft Local Plan. Officers are re-doubling their efforts to identify brownfield sites for development including Kiln Lane and Longmead areas of Epsom and Ewell.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton Ward) welcomed the work being done on brownfield development and called for Green Belt to simply be excluded from the Draft Local Plan.

Cllr **Julie Morris** (LibDem College Ward) drew attention to the Environment Act coming into force in November this year. Major developments require to prove a 10% gain in bio-diversity. An officer explained that this gain is measurable by a pre-development audit and post-development audit according to an established “metric”. Developers can establish the gain from on-site or off-site “off-sets”. Rather like carbon trading. Minor developments will be subject to the 10% bio-diversity gain requirement from April 2024. Cllr Morris argued that the new legal requirement should inhibit Green Belt development.

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Ewell Court), having served on the Planning Committee in the 20th century, was tired of it all and regarded the estimated half-million being spent on the process as a waste and questioned the benefit to residents. However, he acknowledged the legal requirement to have a Local Plan. He also predicted, after having read the Privileges Committee report on Boris Johnson in the morning, a change of government by the time EEBC settled its Local Plan. The councillor implied a new Labour Government would rigidly impose housing targets.

Cllr McCormick explained that a revised timetable for the progression of the Draft Local Plan will be submitted to the committee in due course. Meanwhile, all councillors will be invited to special briefings on the Draft Local Plan process and this would be especially important for the several new councillors elected in May.

Related Reports:

Motion to pause Local Plan process

Public meeting on Local Plan dominated by greenbelters.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Draft Local Plan.

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## Anyone for tennis? If you pay.

24 June 2023



Plans to introduce fees to **Epsom and Ewell Borough's** currently free of charge tennis courts are underway, after several proposals were agreed upon by councillors at a meeting of the **Environment Committee** on Tuesday (13th June 2023). The plans will rely on the approval of a £20,000 grant from the **Lawn Tennis Association** (LTA) to cover the cost of a new gating and booking system.

The proposed fees start at £6 per court per hour with a maximum 5 people £40 household annual subscription available allowing for free bookings of up to 2 hours days. A 50% discount on the subscription is proposed for those in receipt of low-income benefits. Proposals would see the courts bookable three days in advance for those wishing to pay for a single session and up to seven days in advance for subscribers.

Proposed tennis court hourly costs: Ad hoc cost all courts £6.00. Additional cost for floodlit courts £6.00. Annual household subscription costs £40.00 and £20 for those in receipt of low- income benefits.

Income generated from the booking fees would be set aside solely for court maintenance, in line with recommendations agreed upon by the Committee.

Professional coaches will be required to book specific coaching slots and be prohibited from using regular ad-hoc or subscription booking services.

The report put forward to the Committee said that: “The agreement will ensure that court availability for casual play is protected, the core purpose of the parks. This will include restricting the coaching providers to a defined total number of hours to deliver the programme and ensuring that there is always a certain number of courts available for casual play.”

Coaches will also be required to provide a one-hour free community coaching session each week as part of their booking agreement.

If the LTA grant is approved, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council would be required to pay a £2,380 annual subscription for a 5-year period to cover the cost of servicing and maintaining the gates and online booking system.

The LTA has estimated the uptake annual subscriptions in the borough to be £1400 with annual income generated from

the courts estimated at £27,107.

The Council currently provides and maintains 12 public tennis courts across the borough at 5 sites which are currently available free of charge to recreational players.

- Alexandra Recreation Ground, Alexandra Road (three courts)
- Court Recreation Ground, off Pound Lane (three courts)
- Poole Road Recreation Ground, Poole Road (two courts)
- Gibraltar Recreation Ground, West Street (two courts)
- Auriol Park, Salisbury Road (two courts)

The report put forward to the Committee describes the current lack of service charge as a “missed opportunity for income generation.”

It also expresses concern for a delay in action stating that: “if we don’t pursue this opportunity the funding pot available will be depleted and an opportunity to implement the gate system to help the sustainability of our tennis courts will be missed.”

The date for implementation of the new gates and booking system is currently estimated for September 2023.

Image: kance CC BY 2.0

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## Surrey’s vulnerable money support

24 June 2023



Surrey County Council has been allocated a further £10.6m funding to continue to support the county’s most vulnerable households.

The funding comes from the Government’s Household Support Fund as part of a new grant running until March 2024.

Funding has been allocated via the Department of Work and Pensions to help those families who are struggling financially in Surrey, with financial assistance available for food, fuel, water and other essentials. The funds will be distributed via a range of methods and delivery partners to ensure it reaches as many people in need as possible.

A significant portion will go as food vouchers to children on Free School Meals during holiday periods, via borough and district councils and key charities and foodbanks as well as topping up Surrey’s Crisis Fund.

The 10.6m will be staggered across the year, with half the fund being distributed now and the other half in October. The first half of the funding is now with distributing partners and is ready for communities to access.

**Surrey County Council Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities and Community Safety Denise Turner-Stewart said:** “It’s great news that Surrey County Council has received further funding from the Household Support Fund.

“Our top priority is to ensure no one in Surrey is left behind, and this funding will play a vital role in providing support to our most vulnerable residents.

“I’d like to thank our distributing partners for their help in ensuring the funding reaches those who need it most and together we’ll continue to do all we can to support them.”

For more information on the Household Support Fund and distributing partners please visit: <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/health-and-welfare/support/financial-support/household>

For more information on financial support available in Surrey please visit: <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/health-and-welfare/support/financial-support>

Related reports:

How to help “low-incomes” with your £400

Cost of living crisis fails to reach the Surrey summit

Will Epsom’s Foodbank ever end?

Image: globalmoments

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# Surrey's do-re-me for solar to do

24 June 2023



Surrey residents can boost local renewable energy generation, cut carbon emissions and save on their energy bills with a new community led initiative to install solar panels for less.

As part of a group-buying scheme, residents are now able to come together to invest in renewables for solar panels and battery storage, confident in the knowledge that they are paying the right price for a high-quality installation from pre-approved installers.

This innovative scheme builds on six years of a highly successful Solar Together programme run across the UK. To date Solar Together has delivered over 17,000 installations and over 350,000 tonnes of avoided lifetime carbon emissions.

Surrey residents can join the group-buying scheme which offers solar panels with optional battery storage and EV charge points, as well as retrofit battery storage for residents who have already invested in solar panels and are looking to get more from the renewable energy they generate as well as increase their independence from the grid.

It is free to register and there is no obligation to go ahead with an installation. Surrey County Council is working in partnership with all district and boroughs, independent experts iChoosr, to make the transition to clean energy as cost effective and hassle-free as possible.

**Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Environment said:** *“Our target is to be carbon net zero as a county by 2050, and to achieve this we all need to make changes and play our part. There is lots that residents and the county council can do and are already doing, but installing solar panels will make a huge difference.*

*“I am pleased we are working with iChoosr on the Solar Together scheme to support our residents to install solar panels, by giving them the reassurance they are doing so in a cost effective way. We know that the cost of living plays a huge part in this, but I would urge those who are able to invest in solar panels, to really consider getting involved in the scheme.”*

## How does it work?

- Householders can register online to become part of the group for free and without obligation.
- Pre-approved UK solar PV suppliers participate in a reverse auction. They are able to offer competitive pricing as the volume and geographic concentration makes it possible for them to realise greater efficiencies, which they pass on with lower prices for installations.
- After the auction, registered households will be emailed a personal recommendation which is specific to the details they submitted in their registration.
- If they choose to accept their recommendation, the specifics of their installation will be confirmed with a technical survey after which a date can be set for the installation of their solar PV system.
- Telephone and email helpdesks are on-hand throughout the whole process which, together with information sessions, will allow households to make an informed decision in a safe and hassle-free environment.

**Marie-Louise Abretti, iChoosr UK Solar Manager added:** *“With energy prices continuing to increase, residents of Surrey are looking for opportunities to reduce their carbon emissions, save on energy bills and increase their independence from the grid. The Solar Together group-buying scheme offers a straightforward way to make an informed decision and to access a competitive offer from a trusted, vetted provider.”*

iChoosr has a strong track record of delivering group purchase schemes for local authorities. It has worked with 210 UK local authorities on its collective energy switching schemes. Furthermore, in 2018 UK councils, in collaboration with iChoosr, initiated their collective purchase schemes for solar PV systems. iChoosr's schemes have been delivered in partnership with local authorities in five countries. Over 116 schemes led to 157,000 residents installing solar PV systems.

Find out more and register your interest at [solartogether.co.uk/surrey](https://solartogether.co.uk/surrey).

# Surrey Youth Arts and Culture Festival

24 June 2023



This summer, Surrey based cultural organisations, creative industries and education providers will come together to deliver the Surrey Youth Arts and Culture Festivals 2023.

The festivals have been developed by Surrey County Council Libraries, Arts Services and Community Engagement team, in partnership with local and regional stakeholders, including Spelthorne Borough Council, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Visit Staines BID, the Elmsleigh Shopping Centre Staines-upon-Thames, Harlequin Theatre Redhill, Spelthorne Youth Hub, YMCA and a wide range of cultural and community organisations.

Image: A youth consultation evening with young people

The two festivals will take place on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> July in Staines-upon-Thames and Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> of July in Redhill, providing exciting interactive activities for young people aged 11 - 16 to learn about the creative sectors.

The events will feature performances by local arts groups; talks and panel discussions from creative industry experts; and workshops and activities, with support from organisations such as, University of Creative Arts, University of Surrey, Royal Holloway University London, Amazon Film Studios, Pinewood Group, CCSkills and many more.

The festivals run from 12 - 5pm on each day and feature a wide range of drop in and bookable sessions. To see more information and to book sessions please visit: [www.surreycc.gov.uk/youthartsfestival](http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/youthartsfestival).

The project aims to advocate cultural engagement for wellbeing and creative skills development; de-mystify' the creative industries and creative careers; signpost young people to local cultural engagement initiatives and consult young people on what they would like to see more of in their area.

An extensive outreach programme is planned for both locations in the run up to the festivals throughout June, including assemblies in local secondary schools, activities in the local libraries and workshops to create an art installation at each festival and youth co-design sessions, to shape the creative industry panellists and questions.

**Denise Turner-Stewart, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Communities and Community Safety said:** *"The Surrey Youth Arts and Culture festivals provide a much-needed opportunity for young people to explore the diverse world of arts and culture in their local area. Through these festivals, we aim to inspire, empower, and support the young people of Surrey, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their artistic talents are celebrated. Together with our borough council colleagues and local organisations we are really trying to champion young people to come together in a space designed just for them, where they can develop their creative skills together. If your child or anyone you know is aged 11 to 16 I would encourage you to get them involved and sign them up for these exciting free and local events in Staines-upon-Thames and Redhill."*

**Cllr Susan Doran, Chair of the Community Wellbeing and Housing Committee at Spelthorne Borough Council, said:** *"During my Mayoral year in 2022/23, I witnessed young Spelthorne residents display amazing creativity and I believe this festival is something that can inspire them further. The council are delighted to host such a variety of activities at the Elmsleigh Centre in Staines-upon-Thames and believe it is a fantastic opportunity for our residents. There is a real range of free workshops and performances to enjoy, ranging from dance and theatre to craft and animation. My thanks to all the partners and industry experts involved for bringing this wonderful initiative forward which I know will be a great success".*

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# Epsom less flat after more flats approved

24 June 2023



Two new blocks of flats will be built next to **Epsom Railway Station** after planners gave the go-ahead. Planning applications for 16 new homes on the corner of East Street and Kiln Lane and for 20 flats where West Street and Station Approach meet were approved by councillors on Thursday (June 8).

With just two affordable homes over the two developments, both will be subject to a review before completion, to determine if the schemes could provide more than are currently proposed.

Councillors at the **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** planning committee meeting raised concerns about the “dreadful design” and “ruined” entrances to the town regarding the West Street development. But an attempt to refuse the application failed, when a motion put forward by Councillor **Neil Dallen** (Residents’ Association, Town) was lost and the application was approved with six votes in favour and three against.

The development of 20 homes, over five and six storeys, is planned for the former corn and coal merchants which was previously the home of Gillespies Bakery.

The 1905 building will be demolished for a development that was put forward by the developer as a sustainable location for homes that would benefit businesses in the town centre as well as creating jobs during construction.

Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative, Horton Ward), who has spoken out about previous plans for the site, said the site was within the town centre conservation area and within view of multiple listed buildings. She said she wasn’t against something going on the site but worried the conservation area was “meaningless” with no reference to the surrounding buildings in the plans.

Had the designs had “some nod” to the look of that part of the town, Cllr Muir said she would be saying something different. She added: “If we don’t embrace our conservation areas and what that actually means, then we’re just another urban sprawl. And if we want to be another destination high street, this is the beginning of it. This is the one entrance to the town that hasn’t been ruined so far, and that matters to the economic life of the town.”

She and other councillors recognised the need for more housing in the borough, with the council in March having put a pause on the process to develop its plan for homes in the area.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (Residents’ Association, Ewell Village Ward) pointed out that developers had responded to comments and designed a smaller building than plans that had been previously refused on the site. He said you “couldn’t get more sustainable” than a block of flats built next door to the train station and within walking distance of the town centre.

The East Street application, like the one on West Street, had also had previous applications refused and been amended before being approved at Thursday’s meeting.

The development of 16 flats, none of which will be affordable because the scheme would otherwise be deemed non-viable, will be allowed to go ahead after changes to previous plans.

Government inspectors had dismissed an appeal on a previous application because of concerns about pedestrians crossing the access road to the block, off Kiln Lane towards Sainsbury’s.

But after four year’s work on the proposal, which now includes pitched roofs and is of a lower height, plans had been changed and a new footpath had been added to give direct access to the site, avoiding blind corners that had been a concern.

With 18 parking spaces, a suggested condition put forward by Councillor **Jan Mason** (Residents’ Association, Ruxley Ward) was agreed by the committee, to allocate the spaces per flat. Cllr Mason said she wanted to avoid “fisticuffs” as there were at similar developments in her area when residents did not have allocated spaces.

She questioned the “viability” claims of developers, saying houses in Epsom sold “at a premium”, while Cllr **Kate Chin** (Labour, Court) called for a briefing for councillors on affordable housing and what the council could do to ensure more was built.

The scheme of eight one-bed, five two-bed and three three-bed flats was unanimously approved by the committee.

With a decision yet to be made on plans to turn the former Epsom police station into a 96-bed care home, which was due to come to a cancelled committee meeting in April, the committee’s next meeting is due to be on July 20.

Image: Before and after – West Street.

Related reports:

[West Street developers climbing down enough?](#)

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## Woking bankruptcy, far or near to us?

24 June 2023



Woking maybe a town distant on the horizon of **Epsom** but its debts may yet ripple onto Epsom and Ewell taxpayers' shoulders. Chris Caulfield reports.

**Woking Borough Council** has gone bust under the weight of its £2billion debt and banned from any new spending after effectively being declared bankrupt.

The dire situation means the council will cut all spending for non-essential services after a section 114 notice was issued. The authority's debt is forecasted to rise to £2.6bn. The only exceptions are in cases where it must legally protect vulnerable people and for services it must cover by law.

The full impact on residents is not yet clear. Croydon Council, which issued its third 114 notice last year, had to increase council tax by 15 per cent and its till negotiating a bail out for about half a billion pounds.

Woking Borough Council's notice comes three weeks after Government appointed commissioners were sent in by, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLHUC) over the "serious concerns" over the "exceptional level of financial and commercial risk" the authority exposed itself to, "as well as its approach to strategic financial decision making and debt management".

**Julie Fisher**, Woking Borough Council's chief executive, said: "The issuing of a Section 114 Notice is a very serious matter that rightly reflects the scale and breadth of the acute financial situation facing the Council. Through the commissioning of an independent financial review of the Council's borrowing and loans to its companies, we have a comprehensive understanding of our severe financial position which informed the Section 151 Officer's decision to issue a Section 114 Notice.

"The Council is required to meet within 21 days to consider the notice. I am preparing a response to this notice for an Extraordinary Meeting of Full Council that is being arranged for Tuesday June 20 to meet this requirement. Following the Secretary of State's appointment of a Commissioning Team, I will be seeking their expertise and using their critical insight to help the council deliver an Improvement and Recovery Plan at pace to ensure we take actions that are in the interests of the public purse.

My first report on these actions will be to the Thursday 13 July meeting of the Council's Executive."

The council's debt soared into the billions on the back of an investment strategy that saw it borrow hundreds of millions of pounds for regeneration projects.

The most high profile, the Victoria Square development in Woking town centre, was based on £750million in borrowing, with reports now showing the project to be worth just £200m.

The council said its Section 151 officer and interim director of finance issued the notice "in response to the unprecedented financial challenges facing the Council." It said "the expenditure of the council is set to exceed the financial resources available, and therefore it can no longer balance its budget for the current financial year nor subsequent years.

"Against the core funding of £16million available in the 2023/24 financial year, the Council faces a deficit of £1.2billion."

The council has been on DLUHC's radar for sometime, given the scale of its commercial activity and financial situation, noting that, relative to its size is became the "the most indebted local authority" in the UK.

As of December 2022 it had amassed £1.9bn of debt compared to a core spending power of £14m. The section 114 notice means it is no longer possible for the council to balance its budget but as yet the government has not committed to a bail out - the scale of which could have national implications.

The amount of money needed to get the council on to an even keel is beyond the remit of DLUHC and needs formal government approval. However leaked documents from an unpublished report suggested this could impact government borrowing ability.

Two main private companies run by the council, Wey Group and Victoria Square Woking Ltd, generated the majority of its debt through housing and regeneration schemes between 2016 and 2019.

Cllr **Ann-Marie Barker**, leader of Woking Borough Council, said: "My administration has been very clear about the huge financial challenges facing the council due to the legacy of inherited debt.

"The Notice makes clear the true scale of these challenges which are so significant that the Council cannot simply deal with them on its own. We must work in partnership with the whole of government and its agencies to support us in delivering a robust Improvement and Recovery Plan.

"I understand the concerns and questions this will raise, and I am committed to maintaining transparency with residents and partners as we progress through this unsettling time. Difficult decisions will lie ahead as we seek to balance the

Council's budget and address the unaffordable debt."

WOKING'S DEBT CRISIS EXPLAINED

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## Verging on the ridiculous

24 June 2023



Opinion by County Councillor **Eber Kington**: The decision by the Conservative ruling group at **Surrey County Council** to take back from April the cutting of highway verges from **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** was heralded as means of securing consistency across the County. Whether that was meant to be a consistent levelling down of the service (but not the height of the grass!) I am not so sure. But so far it has been a very public display of how not to launch a new service to the public.

It's nine weeks into the new regime and still many verges in Epsom and Ewell have not been cut, and the latest website information shows that many roads in Epsom and Woodcote will have to wait another week before the mowers move in.

There is grass so high that street name plates, bollards and signs cannot be seen, and sight lines that are dangerously obscured, making driving hazardous. Clovers, trefoils and daisies in verges that are of most nectar value and will best cater for our wildlife, are swamped by tall growing grass and weeds. And a policy of blowing back grass cuttings on to the verge, whilst sensible and manageable when the grass is cut at a reasonable level, is not workable when the grass has been left to grow so high. The blow back just spreads the grass on to the footpaths and has the potential to block the drains.

And when the machines have actually done their work, residents in our urban streets are far too often looking out at poorly mown verges peppered with clumps grass, as though our verges were experiencing a bad hair day!

SCC puts it down to "operational issues at the start of the new contract and the wet weather we had in April and at the start of May". Is that politicians way of saying a failure to plan effectively and ensure sufficient resources were deployed from the start. And if a period of rain delays the schedule by nine weeks, that does not augur well for the future given our unpredictable climate.

Sadly, the problem has been compounded by poor communication from SCC. A website page with the scheduled dates for cuts regularly missed and not updated, and just general locations listed (Epsom, Ewell, Stoneleigh) so that residents of Cuddington and Langley Vale, for example, have no idea when their verges will meet up with a SCC grass mower.

At least the Leader of SCC has acknowledged this is not his finest hour and set up Task and Finish Groups to find what went wrong and how it can be fixed. Residents' Association and Independent County Councillors have put in a joint submission highlighting the failings and offering solutions. Those solutions include a commitment to return to the 6 to 8 cuts previously provided by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council - the verges in residential roads are too narrow to support the meadow look.

It is going to take some time for our verges (and residents) to recover from this. Sadly there may be more to come.....from April SCC has also taken back responsibility for weeds, alleyway clearance and highway roundabouts!



County Councillor Eber Kington (RA Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington)

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## Birds dropping trees?

24 June 2023



The fate of trees which a **Surrey golf club** wanted to cut down because of bird poo falling on its clubhouse patio is still unclear. The beech trees outside Guildford Golf Club's clubhouse, in Merrow, were scheduled to be cut down in May, before a last-minute tree preservation order (TPO) was put in place. Guildford Borough Council's officers put the TPO in place on Friday (May 12) just days before the trees were due to be felled, on the following Monday.

Residents and councillors had spoken out against the plans to fell the trees, which are within the **Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**, and officers will decide in the next six months if they should be permanently protected.

People can write to the council to give their views on protecting the trees, though the council's former leader made clear this was not a subjective exercise, but one based on the expert opinions of the council's tree officers.

Councillor **Joss Bigmore** (Residents for Guildford and Villages, Merrow) said he thought they were "beautiful" trees, but there had to be expert analysis rather than people saying: "I just like the tree."

He told the LDRS: "They should be assessed. If they're dangerous, then something needs to be done with them. If they're not, then they should be protected because they're stunning trees. But we should let the experts opine as to whether there is any real danger from them or whether they should be protected."

The golf club set out reasons for wanting to fell the trees in a newsletter to members, seen by the LDRS, which outlined "key reasons" for wanting to fell the trees, including regarding insurance and after storms in January 2022 had brought down one tree at the club.

The newsletter also outlined the "unacceptable" problem of bird droppings falling from the trees and landing on patio seating and tables.

Residents have until June 8 to write to the council to outline their views on if the TPO should be made permanent.

**Katherine Atkinson**, the independent chair of the Board of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), said cutting down the trees "would have a significant negative impact on the local environment and the public's enjoyment of it". She wrote to the borough council regarding the TPO, pointing out the trees' location in the nationally protected AONB and that they provided a "natural screen" for the clubhouse buildings, conserving and enhancing the "scenic beauty of the landscape".

She added: "The trees provide shade for those using the public footpath (especially in the areas with benches) and because they are mature trees they provide important habitat for a wide range of species. The trees stand as a highly visible and highly valued feature within this part of the AONB, from a distance forming a natural green skyline around the clubhouse and contributing to the sweep of landscape up from the bottom of Merrow Downs."

She said the response to the initial plans to fell the trees was "immediate and clear" and that the "amenity value" of the trees to the public was clear.

Councillor **George Potter**, (Lib Dem, Burpham), who sits on the district and the borough council, said the door was "always open" for the golf club to have a discussion about the plans for the trees. He added: "The borough council will make a decision based on the merits of the case, and considering comments made by any and all parties, but public support for making the TPOs permanent would certainly be welcome."

**Maggie Mamen** lives in Canada, but regularly visits Guildford, and wrote to the council to call for the TPO to be made permanent. She said: "It is one of the major joys of these visits to walk up to Merrow Downs and admire the beautiful beech trees outside the club house in all the seasons. It is appalling that they are under any kind of threat."

A **Guildford Borough Council** spokesperson said: "A Provisional Tree Preservation Order was served on Guildford Golf Club on 11 May 2023. Interested parties have at least 28 days to comment on, object to, or support the Order. The Provisional Order will remain in force for up to six months. During this time, but only after the first 28 days, we will consider the responses and decide whether the order will be confirmed."

Guildford Golf Club was contacted for comment.

## Council to pay £15,000 to families over failings

24 June 2023



A “senior level” review into **Surrey County Council**’s educational shortcomings must be carried out and £15,000 paid out to the families it has failed, a local government watchdog ordered.

The county council must also demonstrate what it is doing to increase educational psychology capacity, and cut waiting times – as well as show how it will increase capacity for specialist school places.

The ruling came in three damning reports published by the **Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman** against Surrey County Council that found it has again failed young people.

In the first ruling, the county council was found to have caused someone to miss three quarters of their education over a two year period. According to the published report, a county council ‘fault’ caused an eight-month delay in their education and evidence showed the person’s father had “concerns” his son was “academically behind as a result”. The report read: “He has not received the education he was by law entitled to receive.

“This had a serious impact on [his] educational development and caused him distress by reason of being isolated at home. Our remedies guidance outlines that where no education is provided at all, we would normally recommend £600 per month to remedy a loss of education. There are 10 academic months in each school year. In this case, there was lack of the required provision over two academic years. This equates to a remedy of £12,000.

“However, the council provided 27 per cent of the provision [he] was entitled to receive and so this should be accounted for. This informs a financial remedy of £8,760 to put right [the] loss of education and his associated distress.”

The county council was also ordered to apologise to the family for each area of fault and injustice cause, and to pay a further £200 as an acknowledgement of the uncertainty and distress suffered.

As a result, the ombudsman said the county council must conduct a senior-level detailed written review into its failings. It should focus on “delays in implementing timely alternative provision and the effective monitoring and recording of decisions relating to what provision is suitable in the circumstances”.

The review will then inform “service improvements and policy changes, as well as specific feedback and areas of needed training to those involved in the case”.

The second ruling, issued at the same time in April and published six-weeks later, found council maladministration caused a mother, who said she had to leave work to look after her two out-of-school children, distress. The council blamed staffing changes and shortages but there appears, the ombudsman said, to have been a lack of monitoring or oversight during one of her children’s processes.

Documents seen by the ombudsman showed the council “delayed consulting with schools and finding suitable a school place”.

The watchdog found Surrey County Council to be at fault and that it failed to provide education and SEN provision to the children. As a result the council was told to apologise and pay £100 for time and trouble, £1,000 for distress, and £3,300 for missed provision.

The third ruling the ombudsman issued, found the council to be at fault for a two-month delay in issuing an Education, Health and Care Plan, and then failing to provide what it recommended. The council agreed to apologise and make a payment in recognition of the injustice caused. It must now apologise and pay £200 for the frustration caused by its faults.

The council was also ordered to pay £600 for the loss of provision caused by its delay, and a further £300 every month from the date of the plan until a special school place or suitable alternative provision can be arranged.

Within three months the council must also provide evidence of what it is doing to increase educational psychology capacity and reduce waiting times, as well as evidence of how it will increase capacity for specialist school places.

**Clare Curran**, Surrey County Council cabinet member for education and learning said “We take the findings from the Ombudsman very seriously and we apologise for the distress these families experienced.

We are not able to comment on any individual children specifically, however we are constantly reviewing how we support young people who are unable to attend school, and are implementing our £180million capital programme that is increasing the availability of, and access to specialist provision. We also recognise the significant issues that confront the SEND system nationally.

“We have seen a 64 per cent increase in education, health and care needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, at a time of a national shortage of educational psychologists.”

She added that the council was doing its “utmost” to recruit more but hoped to see the shortage in trained education

psychologists and other issues addressed soon through the government's improvement plan.

Cllr Curran said: "We remain committed to improving outcomes for children with additional needs so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future."

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## Surrey's school transport £12M overspend

24 June 2023



Surrey County Council officers say the authority must tackle a £12million overspend on school transport "to avoid adversely impacting services".

The situation is made all the more difficult as "pressures anticipated for 2023/24 are significantly higher than in recent financial years".

Surrey County Council has a duty to ensure 160,000 school children can get to school each day. Of those, about 9,600 qualify for home to school travel assistance.

In 2021/22, 4,185 children used the travel scheme, up from 3,452 the year before. Between 2017 and 2020 the figure never topped 3,000.

The experience of families applying for travel assistance in the lead up to the 2022/23 academic year were so bad, and the service so overrun, the council set up a review that came back with 50 recommendations.

One parent interviewed as part of the process said "I felt incredibly sorry for them because they must have had every parent in Surrey with children screaming at them".

The review found that during the peak of 2022, travel assistance teams became "stretched and overwhelmed", with key staff absent for "reasons including stress".

The £12m overspend is particularly bad news for parents, many of whom were forced to wait months after the academic year began to get travel provision organised by the council, as the gap between funding and demand is only set to grow, council papers showed.

According to scrutiny papers, the "overall outlook for 2023/24 is one of significant challenge, with budget envelopes remaining relatively static in the face of substantial increases in the cost of maintaining current service provision and increased demand. Despite a small increase in the projected levels of funding, pressures anticipated for 2023/24 are significantly higher than in recent financial years."

The main driver behind the massive budget overspend, officers said, was "significant inflation, policy changes and the need to maintain the delivery of priority services experiencing significant demand pressures". Closing the gap, they said, would "require further actions" that would be "extremely challenging, given the level of pressure forecast, and may require the council to adopt measures that postpone the achievement of [its] ambitions".

An update on the council's finances, discussed on Tuesday, May 30, showed that biggest cause for the the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning directorate's £17.8m total overspend was the result of "rapid increases in demand following the COVID pandemic" for the travel service, and the re-opening of schools "after the 22/23 budget setting process" which was "further compounded by high fuel costs and driver shortages."

Officers have said that "tackling this gap will require a fundamentally different approach, given the level of efficiencies required, to avoid adversely impacting services".

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