

Surrey Business Support Service



Business Surrey – a new Surrey County Council service offering free and accessible support to businesses across the county – has officially been launched by Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jeremy Hunt.

From start-ups to longstanding SMEs, Surrey companies of all sizes, sectors and stages of their business journey can access expert support for no cost via a new website www.businesssurrey.co.uk.

The Council developed the offer to coincide with the transfer of strategic powers to grow the economy previously held by the county’s two Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).

It means for the first time there is a single, co-ordinated business support offer for the whole of Surrey – something which is welcomed by local leaders.

Matt Furniss, Surrey County Council’s Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth, said: *“Surrey has a fantastic economic story to tell – with more than 100,000 businesses, a highly-skilled workforce and world-leading sectors helping generate more than £50 billion a year to the UK economy.*

“But we know there’s more that we can do – which is why I am delighted we have developed Business Surrey, providing a simple and easy way for companies of all sizes to access the support they need to grow.

“By being in a position to support businesses from day one of being handed these functions from LEPs, we are ahead of the national curve – something which can only be positive for our 1.2 million residents and 110,000 businesses.”

Business Surrey provides free and accessible support for all businesses in Surrey - such as targeted bespoke support for high growth companies, highlighting networking events, promoting the county’s innovative sectors, and hosting a live directory of more than 100 national and local initiatives.

The new website also brings together of the business-facing aspects of the Council’s work, including trading standards, Greener Futures and Surrey Fire & Rescue.

Business Surrey went live in April and was officially launched at Huskins in Godalming by the Chancellor Jeremy Hunt last week (Friday May 17).

Also speaking was Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council; Shahid Azeem, the High Sheriff of Surrey; and local tech entrepreneur Terence Naidu.

Representatives from Surrey County Council, business groups, universities and the county’s 11 district and borough authorities were among those attending.

Jeremy Hunt, Chancellor of the Exchequer and MP for South West Surrey, said: *“Surrey is a fantastic place to do business. The innovation and ideas of its residents, combined with sector strengths in creative industries, and tech and life sciences, make it a pivotal region in driving growth for the whole of the UK.*

“That’s why it’s great to see Surrey County Council using the newly transferred powers formally held by LEPs to develop a clear offer to support businesses.

“I would urge businesses at all stages of their journey to contact the Business Surrey team to access expert help and support.”

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said: *“Growing the economy in a sustainable way is a priority for the Council, which can only be achieved by working and engaging with our fantastic business community.*

“Growth is not only good for business; it also generates opportunities for local people, supports investment in our communities, and improves the lives and wellbeing of our 1.2 million residents.

“We’re looking forward to continuing to work closely with our universities, businesses, and local authority partners to capitalise on our enhanced strategic economic role, as it is only through shared expertise that we stand the best chance of growing our economies.”

As part of the launch, Surrey County Council has teamed up with Surrey Chambers of Commerce to hold a series of Business Surrey Roadshow events next month.

The sessions will include practical ways for business owners to access support to grow their enterprises, as well as opportunities to connect with like-minded professionals.

The events take place on:

- June 4 in Camberley – Login Lounge from 8am
- June 6 in Egham – Royal Holloway, University of London from 6pm
- June 13 in Horley – Langshott Manor Hotel from 8am
- June 21 in Leatherhead – Fetcham Park House from 8am

Pre-booking for the events is essential. Secure your space via the Business Surrey website – www.businesssurrey.co.uk/events.

Image: Cllr Matt Furniss, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP and Cllr Tim Oliver at the launch of Business Surrey

Non-political and all-political



Dear Editor,

It is good to see that, despite stepping down as a Borough Councillor, Vince Romagnuolo has lost none of his enthusiasm for historically partisan approach to local politics. Labelling Resident Association councillors closet Conservatives is nothing new. Vince and the Labour Party have never understood the concept of local volunteers whose national voting patterns are often diverse, but who come together in a non-ideological commitment to promote a shared view of localism, civic duty and what is right for all residents in Epsom and Ewell.

If only Vince knew the real national preferences of RA councillors, he might be surprised. Although I never discussed national political allegiances with my RA colleagues, it is sometimes not difficult to know them. There were and are councillors who nationally support the Labour Party, and at least one RA Councillor who was a Labour Party Councillor in another local authority.

So come on Vince, by all means criticise Residents Association councillors if you disapprove of their policies, but please don't use labels and unfounded accusations of national party-political bias to explain the clear voting preferences of residents, the long absence of Conservative councillors, and the actions of Epsom and Ewell MPs over the last 87 years.

With all good wishes

County Councillor Eber Kington

Residents Association Ewell Court, Auriol and Cuddington

[Ed: A right of reply was warranted but we now draw this particular debate to a close on our pages.]

Epsom and Ewell's new Mayor



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has appointed Councillor **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford) as the new Mayor for the year 24/25. In a ceremonial meeting Tuesday 14th May, speeches were made to propose the new Mayor, to thank the outgoing Mayor, and by both the incoming and outgoing Mayors themselves.

Councillor **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) proposed his appointment. He said "I hope I will achieve at least one of these requirements," referring to the traditional brevity and humour expected in such speeches. Cllr Neale detailed Cllr Bridger's extensive background, highlighting his early career in the family-owned wholesale fish business and his long tenure at Tesco, where he achieved notable success. "Steve proudly states that he managed every department... all except working the tills," Cllr Neale quipped. He also mentioned Cllr Bridger's dedication to family, particularly his support for his late son Richard, who battled Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) paid tribute to the outgoing Mayor, Councillor **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court), lauding his achievements over the past year. He highlighted the Civic Celebration of Culture as a significant event and praised Mr Geleit's fundraising efforts. "A charity dinner brought a year of fundraising for his three well-chosen charities to a successful conclusion," Cllr Ames remarked. He also expressed eagerness to have Cllr Geleit return to his duties with the Labour group, emphasizing the importance of his presence in the upcoming general election.

Councillor Rob Geleit reflected on his tenure with gratitude, sharing various highlights from his year as Mayor. "I've had a fantastic year serving Epsom and Ewell and its people," He expressed deep appreciation for his consort, Tina, and the support team, particularly Lolli from the Mayor's office. He recounted memorable events such as the Derby, Christmas carols at Downview Prison, and the Buckingham Palace garden party. He proudly announced that over £15,000 had been raised for his chosen charities, exceeding expectations. "We managed to keep it all together until the end, which may or may well be unprecedented," he said, praising the charity committee's efforts and in particular the dedication of Cllr **Dr. Graham Jones** MBE (RA Cuddington).

In his address, new Mayor Councillor Steve Bridger expressed excitement and gratitude for his new role. He acknowledged the challenges and opportunities ahead and looked forward to serving the community alongside his wife, Carol.

Cllr Robert Leach (RA Nonsuch) will serve as Deputy-Mayor.

Image: L to R Cllr Robert Leach (Deputy Mayor) , Mayor Steve Bridger, CEO Jackie King. The New Mayor takes the chair in Council chamber. Credit EEBBC YouTube

Annual audit of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council



The annual Grant Thornton Auditor's Report on the workings of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has delivered a positive assessment of its performance across financial sustainability, governance, and value for money, despite acknowledging the ongoing challenges the Council faces. The report was formally presented and noted at the Council meeting of 14th May.

Financial Sustainability: The report highlights that the Council operates in a challenging financial environment with prudent short and medium-term planning. While financial stability remains dependent on continual savings plans, the forecast indicates a need to deliver approximately £1.4 million in savings by 2027/28. The auditors emphasized the importance of finding alternatives to using reserves to manage budget gaps, noting no significant weaknesses in financial sustainability arrangements.

Governance: The Council's governance structure was praised for maintaining appropriate arrangements and compliance policies. An updated Risk Management Strategy and adherence to CIPFA's Good Governance Framework were noted as strengths. However, the auditors recommended prioritizing the completion of management actions and reviewing the composition of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee to potentially include independent members.

Value for Money: The Council's efforts to ensure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness were aligned with delivering value for money. Recommendations were made to develop a partnership governance framework and to address underperformance in processing minor planning applications, despite improvements seen in 2023.

Overall, the audit reflects positively on the Council's operations, suggesting continued disciplined financial management and strategic governance enhancements.

Criteria	2022/23 Risk assessment	2022/23 Auditor judgement on arrangements	2021/22 Auditor judgement on arrangements
Financial sustainability	No risk of significant weakness identified.	<div>G</div> Our work did not identify any areas where we considered that key or improvement recommendations were required	<div>A</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but two improvement recommendations have been made.
Governance	No risk of significant weakness identified.	<div>A</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but three improvement recommendations made	<div>A</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified but two improvement recommendations raised.
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	No risk of significant weakness identified.	<div>A</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but one improvement recommendation made to support more effective partnership working arrangements.	<div>G</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and no improvement recommendations raised.
<div> <div>G</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified or improvement recommendation made. <div>A</div> No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified, but improvement recommendations made. <div>R</div> Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendations made. </div>			

The four key recommendations in more detail and the responses of EEBC management:

Grant Thornton Recommendation 1: Timely Internal Audits.

The auditors suggested that internal audits focusing on financial controls should be completed before the end of the financial year to aid the Head of Internal Audit in forming their opinion.

EEBC Management Response: Acknowledging the importance of timely audits, management noted past challenges due to staff turnover and long-term sickness, which have now been resolved. With a fully resourced team, management is confident in meeting the audit schedule, with progress monitored by both the Strategic Leadership Team and the Audit & Scrutiny Committee.

Grant Thornton Recommendation 2: Monitoring Framework for Audit Actions

The council was advised to develop a framework to monitor management actions identified in internal audit reports, ensuring these are completed by the agreed due dates to enhance clarity and accountability.

EEBC Management Response: Management emphasized that a robust monitoring framework is already in place, with the Business Assurance team logging all actions and requiring quarterly updates from Heads of Service. Additionally, new performance management software has been procured to further improve monitoring capabilities.

Grant Thornton Recommendation 3: Audit & Scrutiny Committee Composition

Auditors recommended reviewing the composition of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee to exclude Strategy & Resources members for independence and considering the appointment of independent members.

EEBC Management Response: Management revealed that a review of the committee’s operations is already planned following a Corporate Peer Challenge in March 2024. The audit recommendation will be considered during this review in consultation with relevant members.

Grant Thornton Recommendation 4: Partnership Governance Framework

To enhance partnership working, the council was advised to develop a governance framework to guide and evaluate the success and effectiveness of these collaborations.

EEBC Management Response: Management expressed a commitment to positive partnership working, acknowledging recognition from the recent Corporate Peer Challenge. This recommendation will be considered in conjunction with the Action Plan resulting from the Peer Challenge.

Redrawing Surrey’s political map - literally



Major boundary changes could see some Surrey residents change wards for the next local elections in a redrawing of the political map of the county.

Council wards in Surrey are to increase by over 1,000 residents per councillor by 2029 in new county boundaries which have been drawn up.

Around 70% of ward boundaries will change as the Local Government Boundary Commission estimates an increase of nearly 90,000 people who are reigstered to vote.

The commission says the new layout – which would retain the 81 elected councillors we have today – would help the council to carry out its functions more effectively as it would even out the populations within each division.

The commission is the independent body which draws these boundaries based on community ties, similar electorate numbers and which facilities (e.g parks, leisure centres) it makes sense for people to share.

Varying levels of public consultation on draft proposals took place between February 2023 and March 2024.

Professor Colin Mellors, Chair of the Commission, said: “We are very grateful to people in Surrey. We looked at all the views they gave us. They helped us improve our earlier proposals. We believe the new arrangements will deliver electoral fairness while maintaining local ties.”

Recommendations from the Commission cannot affect the Surrey county’s external boundaries, or result in changes to postcodes. It does not have an effect on local taxes, house prices, or car and house insurance premiums. However, it may affect which ward someone is in.

The Commission is required by law to consider not the number of households, but the number of electors within each division. For instance, residents suggested East and West Molesey should be combined in a single council ward division. However, such a division covering the two borough wards of Molesey West and Molesey East would have 36% more electors than average. it was therefore not accepted because it would have a disproportionate number of eligible voters compared to other wards.

County councils elect its members once every four years. Surrey’s next election is taking place in 2025. Currently, the Conservatives are the largest group with 49 councillors out of a total 81 seats. There are also 16 Liberal Democrats, two Green Party, two Labour (and Co-operative) councillors, four Independents, and 13 from different resident associations and groups.

Changes to ward boundaries will be made so each councillor represents roughly the same number of electors. Recommendations are based on how many electors (ie people registered to vote) there are “likely” to be in five years after the publication of the Committee’s proposal.

Approximately 876,454 eligible voters lived in the county in 2022, averaging at 10,820 electors per councillor. The Commission estimates this number will increase by nearly 90,000 by 2029: Around 964,825 Surrey electors will be divided up to roughly 11,911 residents for each councillor. Just 24 ward boundaries out of 81 will stay the same.

Over 900 comments were made by people and organisations to help decide the new divisions. Changes in response to what local people said include altering the divisions in rural areas of Guildford, in response to fresh evidence on the ‘community identity’.

For example, the village and civil parish of Ash was seen as more urban than rural, consequently moving out of the Worplesdon division and into Shalford. Additionally, Jacobs Well village was reviewed as having stronger community identity and rural connections with Worplesdon parish rather than neighbouring areas of Guildford.”

The Commission opted against having two councillors representing one ward in the Elmbridge borough as SCC argued that larger divisions had the potential to “dilute democratic accountability”. The Molesey Residents’ Association said locals would find a two-member division confusing and that councillors might have difficulty representing a division on this scale.”

The changes become law once Parliament has approved them. Staff at the council will ensure that the arrangements are in place for the 2025 elections.

Review and report: <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/surrey>

Image: Proposed Surrey County boundaries (Credit contains Ordnance Survey data Crown copyright and database rights 2024)

Up to 2003 MPs happy no Conservatives on Epsom and Ewell Council



Dear Editor,

I note with interest the letter from Mr Kington “*Epsom and Ewell was the first Conservative free Council*” outlining the dire electoral fortunes of the Conservative Party in Epsom & Ewell. But he doesn’t tell the full story.

With the odd exception, despite sporadic efforts by eccentric Tory candidates, it is true that it is only since 2003 that the Tories have made a concerted effort to gain seats on the council. The truth is that successive Tory MPs for the area seemed quite happy with the composition of the council due to the fact that, on the whole, the ruling group was made up of small ‘C’ conservatives and in some cases, card carrying Conservative and UKIP members.

It was during the Labour government, with local government being properly funded, that they embarked on a spending spree with taxpayers money. But they gleefully reverted to type when the austerity obsessed Tory/Lib Dem coalition government came to power in 2010 that budgets were slashed following Tory edicts.

Yours faithfully,

Vince Romagnuolo

Former Epsom & Ewell Borough Councillor, 1999-2007, 2015-2019

County Councillor Community funding



Surrey residents can now apply for cash grants to improve their local area through the Your Councillor Community Fund. Last year the Fund supported over 380 community projects via Surrey County Councillors, totalling £404,330.

This community fund is flexibly designed to help with costs that can range from purchasing sports equipment for local clubs, to the creation of websites, providing financial support to community groups and projects that improve the quality of life in for residents in Surrey.

Each year, Surrey County Council’s 81 councillors each allocate £5,000 of funding within their local communities. With their deep understanding of the needs and priorities of their communities they can ensure that the funding is targeted to areas where it is most needed and where it can make the biggest impact. It can be used across a variety of projects that help promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their communities.

Surrey County Council Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Customer and Communities Denise Turner-Stewart said: “*As a council we are committed to working together with communities to improve the lives of people living or working in Surrey. The Your Councillor Community Fund is a great example of how even a small amount of funding can make a big difference in the communities we serve. These initiatives can help to deliver such things as sports for fitness, places to come together, providing facilities that help improve health and wellbeing and in other cases an improved pride in their local areas.*

“It embodies our commitment to empowering local residents to have a say and make a real difference in their own communities. By supporting initiatives driven by the passion and dedication of our residents, we aim to create vibrant, inclusive communities where everyone thrives”.

The Your Councillor Community Fund is open now and closes in January 2025.

To apply for money from this year’s Your Councillor Community Fund you should contact your Epsom and Ewell Councillor. They are:

Epsom Town & Downs Steven McCormick Epsom Town & Downs Residents Association
Steven.McCormick@surreycc.gov.uk

Epsom West Bernie Muir Epsom West Conservative **bernie.muir@surreycc.gov.uk**

Ewell John Beckett Ewell Residents Association **john.beckett@surreycc.gov.uk**

Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington Eber Kington Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington Residents Association
Eber.Kington@surreycc.gov.uk

More information can be found here **Your Councillor Community Fund - Surrey County Council (surreycc.gov.uk)**.

Examples of projects funded last year include:

£1,493 to help make Spelthorne cleaner and greener by providing group litter picking equipment which can be loaned out to encourage individuals, groups and schools to adopt an area for regular picking and to take a pride in their local environment.

£2,000 towards equipment for the 2023 Shepperton Village Fair, including banners, sail flags, display board and cashless payment devices.

£700 towards replacing a 25-year-old table tennis table used by Leatherhead U3A Table Tennis Group, helping to keep members physically and socially active.

£1,000 towards new uniforms for Godalming Youth Band. The new polo shirts and hoodies are more suitable for events all year round and will be loaned out, much like the instruments, to help keep music-making as accessible as possible.

As well as Your Councillor Community Funding, there is also funding available via Your Fund Surrey for small and large community projects. Visit **www.surreycc.gov.uk/yourfund** to find out more.

Image: Left to right - County Councillors McCormick, Muir, Beckett and Kington

Green view of Mole Valley elections



Dear Editor,

In Mole Valley national issues probably mostly impacted the main parties who lost support. However these local election results will be of little significance in the forthcoming General Election in Epsom and Ewell constituency for several reasons.

Firstly only a small area of Mole Valley falls within the parliamentary constituency of Epsom and Ewell, namely Ashted and Leatherhead. While these two areas will be very important to our campaign in the General Election there did appear to be some tactical or protest voting in the local elections in Mole Valley as there was no great change in turnout. In Leatherhead Liberal Democrats were elected with a similar vote compared with 2023 despite their record of supporting development in the Green Belt.

The Green Party targeted resources in the Dorking area of Mole Valley in order to maintain a previous strong showing there. Secondly, as local elections did not take place for the Epsom Borough Council area the bulk of voters in the Epsom and Ewell constituency were not able to express their choices at the ballot box.

Nevertheless the threat to the Green Belt will be one of the key issues in the General Election in Epsom and Ewell as a whole so voters will have a genuine opportunity to test candidates about this particular matter, which is of great priority for the Green Party, including in Ashted and Leatherhead where we will be actively campaigning to galvanise our support there.

Finally, whilst votes were quite well dispersed across different parties in the local elections in Mole Valley there will be even more parties standing in the General Election in Epsom and Ewell including the Green Party. The share of the vote will also probably be quite dispersed as a result in the General Election and in this scenario tactical voting will be of limited benefit. In such circumstances voters will be well advised to vote for policies they believe in, as a surprise result is quite likely.

Stephen McKenna

Prospective Parliamentary Candidate Green Party Epsom and Ewell

Epsom and Ewell was the first Conservative free Council



Dear Editor,

I refer to your article on the May local elections headed ***“First Surrey Borough with no Conservative Councillors”*** and which includes the comment that ***“The result makes it [Woking] the first council in Surrey not to have a single Conservative councillor.”*** However, that is certainly not the case.

From 1937, when the Borough of Epsom and Ewell was created, and until 2003 (66 years), the Conservative Party was only represented on the Borough Council twice (and by a very small number of councillors). Since 2003 the Conservative Party has maintained a constant presence, but never larger than four in number and it is currently languishing at two.

Whilst I don’t wish to diminish the historical importance of the Conservative Party’s demise in Woking, they have had to face regular failures at the ballot box in Epsom and Ewell ever since George VI became King.

Yours faithfully,

Eber Kington

Residents Association County Councillor Ewell Court, Auriol and Cuddington

[Mr Kington is an Honorary Alderman of the Borough of Epsom and Ewell and served as Borough Councillor for many years.]

Spelthorne in financial trouble



Inspectors have been sent to Spelthorne Borough Council as concern grows over its ability to deal with its extreme debt and borrowing. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has been working with the borough since May 2022 and now the Secretary of State has weighed in over the “authority’s extremely high levels of debt and borrowing”.

A letter to Spelthorne Borough Council’s chief executive, confirming the department’s decision to appoint Lesley Seary to carry out a formal inspection of the council over its capital risk was published on Wednesday, May 8.

It read: “As of March 31 2023, Spelthorne’s debt was £1.096 billion, which was 87.1 times the council’s core spending power and 52.4 times its total service expenditure.”

The average borough council has a debt to spending ratio of 5.65.

A July review of the borough’s finances also found the council needed “expert independent support” to assist with its “immediate and ongoing financial challenges” and required help to mitigate its risk as well as improve its governance and decision-making culture.

It comes just four months after another Surrey authority, Runnymede Borough Council was served a notice over its finances, and a year after Woking Borough Council declared itself bankrupt.

Concerns over the council’s finances date back to a 2017/18 report from accountants KPMG – published in November 2022. It highlighted concerns over the council’s investments and set out the auditor’s view that Spelthorne Borough Council had acted unlawfully in borrowing and then purchasing three properties.

The Secretary of State has given certain directions to Lesley Seary’s inspection. First, she will examine concerns over the council’s governance and scrutiny, with particular attention to its financial arrangements and decision making. She is also looking into the council’s ability to carry out its new housing strategy, as well as the impact its investment portfolio has had on service delivery.

The inspector, who will have right-of-access to all council premises and documents, will then report her findings to the Secretary of State by August 30. The council has also been told it cannot destroy any documentation or records.

The letter was sent as part of a best value directive from DLUHC. As part of the process the council must publish its response, together with the letters on its website.

The statement from Spelthorne Borough Council read: “Over a year ago, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) asked the professional body for public sector finance, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), to review Spelthorne Borough Council’s investment portfolio and borrowing position.

“The authority has now received a letter from the department advising that they have appointed an independent inspector to undertake a review of Spelthorne Borough Council to seek assurance that the Council complying with its Best Value Duty.

“The Secretary of State decided to commission this inspection to provide him with direct, independent assurance that the council has ‘arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, with regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.’

“The government letter outlines concerns around debt relative to size of the Council’s budget and governance whilst acknowledging that Spelthorne Borough Council has engaged constructively with the Department since 2022 and already taken action to mitigate risk.

“DLUHC has appointed Lesley Seary as Lead Inspector, who is independent of government, and has asked her to report her findings to the Secretary of State by 30 August 2024.”

Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Councillor Joanne Sexton welcomed the review and would work with the inspector and her team.

She said: “This administration has taken many decisive and positive steps since the May 2023 election including instigating a full external independent review of our commercial property portfolio. Additionally, we have reduced future borrowing requirements by nearly £200m and are pursuing alternative ways to deliver more affordable housing. We will continue to work with DLUHC in an open and transparent way and look forward to receiving the findings of the report.”

“The rental income received from our commercial property portfolio more than covers the financing costs and provides a significant contribution to support council services, additionally there is a reserve to cover possible income variation in future years.”

Spelthorne’s neediest lose out on housing

‘Crisis point’ in local government funding

Relative relief about Epsom and Ewell’s debt?

Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council, Ashford East councillor Joanne Sexton, at the council building in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp