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Fast track your planning application at a premium

From 1 April 2024, applicants submitting certain planning applications in Epsom & Ewell will be able to choose to ‘fast track’ their application.

Developed to meet customer demands, the new optional service will be helpful to applicants who have a builder waiting to start work, or who need building work to start or finish by a certain date. Applicants will be able to pay to have their planning applications determined more quickly than the statutory eight-week period.

The types of applications that can be fast-tracked are:

- Householder Applications – for instance, those required for extending homes e.g. building a single storey rear extension, or front porch.
- Certificate of Lawful Development Proposed (Householder) – an application to show that the work you are proposing to do to a house is a ‘permitted development’ and therefore doesn’t need a formal application. Sometimes you will need a certificate of this nature when you sell a house.

The fast-track fee is £350 for a Householder Application and £150 for a Lawful Development Certificate and is paid to the council, in addition to the usual cost of submitting a planning application.

Councillor **Steve McCormick**, (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Committee, said,

“We are incredibly proud of our Planning department who in the last year, have overcome significant challenges to go from being one of 10 UK council teams performing below an expected threshold of 70% for minor/other applications, to well exceeding national targets. It is brilliant that Epsom & Ewell Borough Council can now facilitate a service which will meet an obvious need for many residents wishing to progress building projects within the borough.

“I hope that this will ease stress for many people working to tight timelines for their builds.”

Applicants can learn more about the service and apply by visiting the council’s dedicated webpage: Fast Track Service | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (epsom-ewell.gov.uk)

How many £s does it take to change a Council light bulb?

The cost of changing Council light bulbs was the subject of some concern at Tuesday 26th March’s meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**. The committee was considering the annual maintenance programme for Council run properties.

Cllr. **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) enquired: “I thank the officers for a very thorough report, but when I look at the planned maintenance, it does seem to me that this is an area where a stricter financial control is perhaps needed. I look at some of these figures with amazement. £56,000 to change the light bulbs in Bourne Hall. £70,000 to paint the woodwork in Ewell Court House. What controls do we have that we are getting value for money from these contractors?”

The Council Officer replied: “With Bourne Hall, to change a light bulb in this building is not a simple case of getting a step ladder out. It needs scaffolding to get up to these lights here. The costs of replacing the lighting also includes all the equipment to enable those lights to be replaced where they’re in very hard to reach positions. So it’s not just simply changing light bulbs.”

Cllr Leach’s question on financial controls was left unanswered.

Cllr. **Alison Kelly** (LibDem College) wanted to know about the environmental cost of the main entrance doors to the Epsom Playhouse that open directly onto the lobby. It was observed that the construction of an second inner set of doors was resisted by the theatre as it would take away vital foyer space.

Cllr. **Graham Jones** MBE (RA Cuddington) had earlier that day taken a stroll over to the Epsom Playhouse and had a “light bulb” moment. He suggested: “I’ve seen quite a lot of places where instead of taking away from the lobby you go outwards. There’s lots of space there, and it would make a really nice feature and I would recommend that you consider that option.” His idea was warmly received with the officer responding: “That would be exactly the solution. Hence why it would need to be a future capital bid. Because that’s clearly a larger project than creating it within the building itself. But you’re absolutely spot on. Thank you.”

Chalk Pit action – a tale of two committees

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council grappled with the pressing issue of noise and dust pollution stemming from the waste recycling centre, Chalk Pit off College Road in Epsom. Residents’ longstanding grievances prompted a debate among council members at yesterday’s meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee.

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The discussion opened with an account from an affected resident, urging action to alleviate the suffering. The resident implored the council: “Epsom and Ewell Borough Council must allocate funds to proactively manage the Chalk Pit site, in accordance with your statutory duty to protect residents under the Environmental Protection Act.” There was support from a pro-active public gallery that was asked a couple of times not to interrupt.

Councillors echoed residents’ concerns, emphasizing the gravity of the situation and the need for decisive measures. Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodocte and Langley) emphasized the Council’s duty to support residents, stating, “This Council has been formed to serve local interests and must prioritize residents’ wellbeing by allocating funds to tackle the Chalk Pit issue.”

The legal dimensions of the problem were underscored by Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative – Horton), who highlighted residents’ legal rights and the Council’s responsibility to address statutory noise nuisance. “Residents have a legal right to be protected,” declared Muir, emphasizing the need for unequivocal support for allocating funds.

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem – College) emphasized the importance of prompt action, proposing earmarking funds to respond swiftly to noise complaints. “We must prioritize residents’ protection and ensure prompt action when noise nuisance is experienced,” Lawrence asserted, urging fellow council members to prioritize residents’ needs.

The wide-ranging impact of pollution on residents’ health and wellbeing was emphasized by Councillor **Christine Howells** (RA Nonsuch), who stressed the Council’s duty to enforce compliance with regulations. “Residents’ mental and physical wellbeing are compromised, necessitating urgent action to protect their rights,” Howells affirmed.

Amidst impassioned pleas for action, the Chair of the Committee, Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA Town), provided a sobering assessment of the financial implications. Cllr. Dallen cautioned against hasty decisions, citing budget constraints and the need for responsible financial management to ensure continued service provision.

An officer provided updates on recent developments and enforcement actions, highlighting ongoing complaints and regulatory interventions. The officer’s report underscored the need for coordinated efforts to address pollution effectively.

Despite financial constraints, Cllr **Shanice Goldman** (RA Nonsuch) voiced support for allocating funds, citing previous actions and the importance of addressing environmental issues promptly. “We must prioritize residents’ welfare and take decisive action to address pollution,” Shanice urged fellow council members. She added: “ I think the fact that it’s been passed from committee to committee, started off at full Council, was deferred to the Environment committee then passed on to this committee. I don’t think we can justify passing it on again.”

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) shared residents’ grievances and proposed practical measures to address noise issues, emphasizing the moral imperative to protect residents. “We must cooperate across party lines and take decisive action to address this environmental tragedy,” Leach asserted. He read from a resident’s email: “I was awakened at 6.30 this morning by the sound of the site, preparing for the day, with lorries and presumably other machinery warming up and skips being made ready for transport before 6:45 a.m. A number of skipped lorries were exiting the site last week. On last Friday, 39 lorries left between 6.40 and 6.50. That is before they’re even supposed to be on the site. Let’s tell it as it is. We have two operators there, who blatantly just ignore the regulations.”

Following extensive deliberation, the Committee unanimously resolved to approve the allocation of funds. £40,000 was reserved for independent noise investigation, with an additional £100,000 allocated for potential enforcement and litigation work. The Environment Committee was tasked with identifying equivalent savings or income to replenish the reserve by the end of the financial year 2025-2026.

Related reports:

“Heat and Dust” epic in Epsom

Chalk Pit debate deferred by late abatement

Will the dust ever settle on Chalk Pit conflict?

Council cancel culture?

Some opposition Councillors on **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** have voiced concerns over the apparently high rate of cancellation of policy and scrutiny committees of the Council on which they serve.
Epsom and Ewell Times has looked at the 8 policy, audit and standard committees (and Full Council) in the Council calendar ending 31st March 2024.

Of 39 programmed meetings 9 are marked as having been cancelled in the 12 month period.

Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) said “With 4 policy committees cancelled in March it does beg the question if the Residents’ Association (the ruling group on the Council) leadership has run out of steam and ideas. There is little evidence of a vision and the laser focus needed to tackle the challenges the borough faces. Homelessness costs the council ever increasing amounts to house residents in out of borough temporary accommodations away from their children’s schools and family support networks. Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour these are the issues we hear about on residents’ doorsteps and where the residents want change.”

She added: “We need the committees’ meetings to generate ideas and plan how to manage these difficult issues rather than ignoring them in the misguided hope they will go away.”

Cllr. **Julie Morris** (Liberal Democrat – College Ward) said: “The Liberal Democrats have been concerned at almost a whole cycle of policy committee meetings being cancelled. A progress statement, or discussion in public, on the Draft Local Plan is long overdue, amongst other progress reports on various topics. Whether or not decisions are being taken under delegated powers, or whether or not decisions do not actually need the meeting of a policy committee to take place, is irrelevant.

The point is that surely it is now virtually impossible for either councillors or the public to influence an agenda, similarly for the public to know what’s going on within the Town Hall, or track a topic, nor is it obvious what major or minor decisions are being taken, and how and why they are being taken. Public engagement is at an all time low, lower than it has been at any time during my 27 years involved with the borough council.”

She is proposing a motion at the next Full Council meeting due 16th April to promote greater transparency and reduce private sessions of committees that exclude press and public without clear justification.

Cllr. **Robert Leach** (Residents Association – Nonsuch Ward) said: “My understanding is that a meeting is cancelled if there is nothing to discuss. Simple as that!”

Cllr. **John Beckett** (Residents Association – Auriol Ward) said: “The reality is that the Council agrees dates of committee meetings up to 18 months in advance and Council business doesn’t always fit with the timings of the agreed dates. Every council cancels and adds meetings to its annual calendar to reflect this and EEBC is no different. Also, no meeting is ever cancelled, or an extraordinary meeting called without there being a valid reason to do so.”

Cllr. **Alex Coley** (Residents Association – Ruxley Ward) is Chairman of the Crime and Disorder Committee which has had three out of four meetings *apparently* cancelled, said: “There was a Crime & Disorder scrutiny committee from May 2022 to May 2023 which never met. This is because it would have duplicated the crime & disorder scrutiny powers of the Audit & Scrutiny committee. The cancellations of 10 Nov 2022, 10 Jan 2022 and 4 Apr 2023 were programmed in advance and should ideally be removed.

The current Crime & Disorder committee had meetings programmed into the annual calendar before I became chair. Upon taking the role I decided it would be more practical to reschedule the 2 Nov 2023 and 19 Mar 2024 meetings so they are in line with the other policy committee meetings which align to the Council’s

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budget cycle (hence 12 Sep 2023 and 17 Jan 2024). I believe that ModGov (committee software) shows reschedules as cancellations."

A spokesperson for Epsom and Ewell Borough Council wrote: "Committee Meeting dates are agreed up to 18 months in advance, and Council business does not always fit with the timings of the agreed dates. It is normal practice in every council to cancel, reschedule or add meetings to reflect this, and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is no different. We have thorough, legally compliant and transparent processes to propose and add items to Committee Meeting agendas, and no Committee meeting is ever cancelled or rescheduled (or an Extraordinary meeting called) without there being a valid reason to do so."

Epsom and Ewell Times has looked at the committee calendars of the other ten Surrey Boroughs for the same period.

It is not possible to compare accurately as each Council uses its own terminology. Some Council's may programme fewer meetings in the first place. We have ignored, as we did for Epsom and Ewell, sub-committees, postponements and committees driven by external demand eg., planning and licensing.

Elmbridge Borough Council is very difficult to compare as it uses a different nomenclature and form for its committees. Guildford Borough Council cancelled 8 meetings in the same period. Mole Valley District Council appears to have had 3 equivalent committee meetings cancelled. Reigate and Banstead Borough Council cancelled 3. Runnymede Borough Council = 1 . Spelthorne Borough Council = 3. Surrey Heath Borough Council – None. Tandridge District Council – None. Waverley Borough Council -2 and Woking Borough Council – None.

Related reports:

"Audit and Scrutiny" under scrutiny

Should we have a petition about petitions?

'Crisis point' in local government funding

Parties from across the spectrum called on the next government to change its funding model for local councils, claiming it is "not fit for purpose".

Councillor **Robert Evans** (Labour, Spelthorne) told Surrey County Council (SCC) it should call on the next government to bring in a "fairer and robust system to replace council tax". He put forward the motion at Surrey's full council meeting on Tuesday, March 19.

Introduced in 1993, council tax is based on 30-year-old property valuations (from 1991). This is not affected by changes in house prices or how much the property is worth today.

Average house prices in Surrey have risen over 400 per cent, from £103,569 in January 1995 to £525,897 in December 2023.

Leader of the County Council **Tim Oliver** (Conservative, Weybridge) said the issues are not party-political, but "local government vs central government". He added: "Everything should be put on the table. We are now at a crisis point within the local government and we need to do something different."

Wage inflation, general inflation and soaring demands in adult social care and child services have squeezed council budgets, exceeding the income received from central government. The Local Government Association (LGA) found councils have suffered a 27 per cent real-terms cut in core spending power since 2010.

Council tax for Surrey residents will increase a further 4.99 per cent from April, as the county leader claims £1.2bn net is needed for the council. Around 70 per cent of SCC's budget is spent on social care. With Surrey's older demographic and ageing population, the demands on care are likely to increase.

Deputy leader for bankrupt Woking Borough Council, Cllr **Will Forster** (Liberal Democrats) said: "When there is so much cross-party consensus, in and out of the political spectrum, I think something is up."

Cllr Forster said as a "ridiculous comparison" , Buckingham Palace, valued at £1bn, sits in Band H and pays just over £1,800 council tax, which is equivalent to a Band B property in Surrey.

In the short-term, Cllr Evans suggested the government could introduce new council tax bands "so the wealthy in larger homes could contribute a fairer percentage of their income to Surrey".

He also suggested as a long-term proposal, to replace council tax, stamp duty and the bedroom tax with a "proportional property tax based on property values updated annually". Another "more radical" option would be a land tax as land or a site itself- not the buildings or anything on it would be valued.

Discussions on local government funding were extended to include reforming business rates and highways funding. Speculative options also mentioned a local levy on fuel duty and petrol stations, airport tax, tourists charges, increased fines in breaches of highway rules.

The motion was resolved that SCC would lobby the next government, following the General Election, to overhaul local council funding.

Related reports:

Local Government monopoly board at play?

How far will £500m go for Surrey Councils?

Tory leader pleads with Tory Government

Work starts on Surrey's respite centre for autistic people

Families set to benefit from new short breaks accommodation being built in Woking helped mark the official start of work at a milestone groundbreaking ceremony.

The purpose-built £5.7m facility will enable autistic people and those with learning disabilities to enjoy new experiences while their families take a break from caring. It's part of Surrey County Council's drive to create the right homes with the right support for people who need it and represents a major investment in

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specialist accommodation to help people achieve greater independence.

Enjoying some early spring sunshine, families were joined at the site in Goldsworth Park by representatives from the county council as well as architects AtkinsRealis and contractors Neilcott Construction. Also marking the occasion were Woking MP Jonathan Lord and representatives from Woking Borough Council and local community organisations.

The new accommodation on the site of the old Lakers Youth Centre will provide eight ensuite bedrooms as well as a sensory room, a communal lounge / dining room and landscaped gardens. It will provide the first such service in this part of the county and will ultimately add almost 2,500 nights of additional short breaks capacity per year for adults with additional and complex needs.

Guests will be able to enjoy new opportunities, make friends, gain new skills and connect with their communities during short stays without their family carers, who will be able to take some time away from their caring responsibilities to focus on their own wellbeing.

The event on March 14 marked the first 'spade in the ground' for an ambitious county council strategy which aims to deliver more than 1,400 units of specialist accommodation for adults with support needs across Surrey, including the redevelopment of another short breaks site in Banstead. Supported independent living accommodation for those with learning difficulties and mental health needs is also part of the plan, as well as extra care housing for older residents which will have support workers on hand if needed.

Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council cabinet member for Adult Social Care, said: "*Unpaid carers across Surrey do an amazing job in ensuring that their loved ones can continue to live in their own homes, but it can take a toll on even the most dedicated partner or relative. The new accommodation will represent a state-of-the-art facility designed to provide the person being cared for with the support they need, while offering their carer the chance to recharge their batteries by taking a break themselves.*

"*We're delighted to have broken ground and eagerly await the opening of the new accommodation next year. We want our residents to be able to live their best lives and our ambitious building programme to provide the right homes with the right support will help us achieve that.*"

Natalie Bramhall, cabinet member for Property, Waste and Infrastructure said; "*We're pleased to have broken ground on the site in Goldsworth Park. The site of this new short breaks service is one of many projects being delivered by our Land & Property Capital Programme team in partnership with Adult Social Care to help people stay independent, safe and well so they can live the lives they want.*"

The star of the day was Jodie, a potential future user of the centre who currently visits the council's short breaks service in Banstead.

After watching an architectural 'flythrough' video of the new accommodation alongside assembled guests, **Jodie's mum Jean**, voiced her approval: *"The one thing you want from a respite centre is to know that your children – young adults – are secure, safe & happy." She further explained: "Having respite breaks is absolutely a 'must' for parents and to have a facility that's been purpose built… is totally invaluable.*"

Andrea, mum to Brandan, who also currently attends the service in Banstead, added: "*Brandan needs 24-hour care seven days a week – it does not stop for us as parents – and this will be an invaluable service so near to our home. But it's not only for us, it's about Brandan. We want him to feel it's like a holiday. We can be happy and relaxed knowing that he is happy.*"

Image: *(left to right) Jonathan Lord MP, Jodie, Jodie's Mum Jean, and Cllr Sinead Mooney*

Surrey Borough running ahead on bio-fuel

The first Surrey council to switch its entire vehicle fleet from diesel to waste fats and cooking oil said the move could cut emissions by about 90 per cent. **Runnymede Borough Council** said the decision, unanimously approved by its environment and sustainability committee last week, will stop about 650 tonnes of C02 from being released into the air each year.

The shift to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) is expected to take place over the coming months as about 80 of the council's refuse trucks, minibuses, vans, street sweepers and other vehicles make the switch.

It makes Runnymede Borough Council the first in Surrey to go all in on HVO with the change expected to make greater inroads into reducing the council's operational carbon emissions than any other initiative explored to date.

Details on how much it will cost have been kept private and confidential but the day-to-day operating costs of moving over to HVO are expected to be higher than with diesel, the council confirmed, but said it had set aside an additional £100,000 to cover fuel costs.

A statement issued by the council said it demonstrated the desire "across all parties to make an effective and lasting positive impact on Runnymede's climate and environment".

Committee chair Councillor **David Coen**, said: "It is great to know that in the coming months our fleet, from our bin lorries to our road sweepers, will continue to provide the same high level of service whilst producing less harmful pollution into the environment and people's lungs.

"We've committed that by 2030 all our council operations will be carbon net zero. Switching over to HVO has the potential of hugely reducing the council's overall carbon emission."

HVO can be used with the council's existing fleet without the need for engine modifications or new machinery.

Cllr **Don Whyte**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group and member of the environment and sustainability committee added: "It's a positive move. Runnymede is very late coming to the climate crisis declaration. This is a small step, but it's an important thing."

Soni of Stagecoach Epsom lands lead role

Vishal Soni student of Stagecoach Performing Arts in **Epsom** landed the lead role in the National Theatre's musical production of Roald Dahl's **The Witches**.

Vishal fought off strong competition in auditions to land the role of Luke in a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale. In the original the boy at the centre of the story is unnamed. "Luke" follows the 1990 film version which gave the boy the name.

Performing on stage at the National Theatre for the 11-week production, Vishal shone in his remarkable portrayal of the courageous young protagonist.

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The Witches is a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale, filled with wit, daring and heart. The Witches have come up with their most evil plan yet, and the only thing standing in their way is Luke and his Gran.

Vishal has been a student of Stagecoach Performing Arts in Epsom for nine years and has an impressive resume under his belt, including standout performances in The Sound of Music at Chichester, a UK tour of Les Misérables, and The Prince of Egypt in London's West End.

His upcoming role in the 2024 film adaptation of musical, Wicked, is a testament to his unwavering passion and undeniable talent.

Commenting Rachel Crouch, Principal of Stagecoach Epsom, said: "I've always been immensely proud of Vishal. Not only has he gone from job to job, but he has done so with such a professional and humble attitude. He's an absolute star and we couldn't be prouder. Thank you also to HF Management, his fabulous agents."

The Witches run at the National Theatre has now closed. Wicked is due to be released later this year.

Vishal in the production at the National Theatre. Photo credit: Marc Brenner

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It's not a fair cop? Cllr. Coley on police funding

Did you know that Surrey is the only police area in the country where local residents pay more towards policing than central government? The share of the burden is 55% Council Tax precept, versus 45% government funding.

The average Council Tax precept contribution in England and Wales is 34% and is growing faster than any other funding area. Government capital funding and funding for national priorities like serious violence is decreasing. From March 2016 to March 2024 the Council Tax precept nationally has increased by a total percentage of 71%. While government funding from March 2016 to March 2024 has only increased by 29%.

We are approaching a point where other police areas will join Surrey and cross the line where the Council Tax precept provides the majority of funding. Within three years a third of police areas may cross that point, in five years it could be half. Not only are residents being taxed twice for policing, many will soon face being directly taxed for the majority of police funding contributions where they live, just like in Surrey.

A quiet and gradual funding shift by stealth. We may find ourselves experiencing American style policing, where your local police are exclusively bought as a service paid for with a property tax. You only have to look at what happened in some US towns and cities when wealthy people moved out and funding collapsed. Criminal gangs move in sensing weakness and create a cycle of deprivation and self-reinforcing criminality driven by ever decreasing budgets that deter investment and prosperity. I am determined we don't end up like that and the government provides fairer funding.

At a meeting of the Surrey Police & Crime Panel we were asked to vote on the Police & Crime Commissioner's maximum increase to the precept. I asked her to consider other funding sources because of the impact of yet another maximum increase on residents suffering from the cost-of-living crisis after years of austerity. She had her staff answer for her: "What do you want us to do, pass a hat around?"

The Police & Crime Commissioner has £43m in treasury management, she underspent by £8.7m last year and is forecast to underspend again this year. Your Council tax is going into her reserves, while police officers are taken off the streets to cover desk jobs for staff vacancies. Little wonder that the recent inspection report assessed Surrey Police as 'Inadequate' at responding to the public.

I am petitioning parliament to change the police funding allocation formula so council taxpayers don't contribute more to their police force than government.

Please sign the petition here: alexcoley.uk/petition

"Bonkers but essential" job to cut back jobs?

'Bonkers but essential' is how a new £75,000 job, running bankrupt Woking Borough Council's decimated leisure and communities services is being described.

Last month, the council cut more than £8million from its budget; slashing spending on daycare centres, Citizens Advice Woking, and telling Pool in the Park to become self-sustaining or risk closure.

Now, it is advertising a new Head of Leisure and Communities to oversee the service and, on top a basic salary of between £65,624 and £76,439 a year, includes a £3,255 'flexible benefits allowance".

The advert, which runs until March 24, is seeking somebody to lead on the "commissioning, oversight and delivery of a range of leisure and community services, ensuring the facilities are operated in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way."

The successful candidate will be in charge of leisure contracts, sports and leisure services, arts and culture, community centres, and community safety.

A spokesperson for Woking Borough Council described the role as "a permanent position" adding that it was "essential to ensuring these services can move to a self-financing position through strong and effective partnerships, including managing the Council's leisure contract."

The outgoing postholder played a key role in making it possible for the borough to retain as many of the services it has, in the face of the necessary swinging cuts needed to balance its books. Leader of the opposition, Councillor Kevin Davies said: "Ultimately you can argue that it s a non-statutory service, but the residents of Woking have made it extremely clear that they see it differently.

"On the face of it, the high value of the role is galling particularly as people have been made redundant but the (post holder) will be responsible for a lot of services that people hold dear.

"Will the council come across as tone deaf? Of course, but the residents want these services as at the end of the day.

"It looks bonkers, but it's to protect something that people see as absolutely valuable. We need a really good person and the incumbent has done a really good job in protecting as many of the services we could – without him we'd have lost Pool in the Park."

He added that the service would soon become a "shadow of its former self" with the council delivering the minimum is could get away with, for the maximum tax. He said: "Before it was trying to do the opposite, the real answer should be somewhere in the middle.

Among the role's duties will be working with both public and private sector partners to develop a "healthy, inclusive and engaged community" and to drive new initiatives that support residents as well as commissioning and contract management.

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