

## A Green Group that won't belt up



In a comprehensive critique of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's** handling of the Local Plan, a local environmental advocacy group, known as **Epsom Green Belt**, argues there are shortcomings in the council's approach.

In a response to the council's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (reported by the Epsom and Ewell Times [HERE](#)) they assert that the council's failure to provide clear and timely information about changes resulting from public consultation leaves residents in the dark about crucial decisions that will shape the borough's future.

One of the group's key contentions centres around the council's delay in analyzing consultation responses. Despite assurances of ongoing analysis, no outcomes have been made public, leaving residents to speculate about the fate of their feedback. This lack of transparency, the group argues, undermines the democratic process and erodes trust in local governance.

Furthermore, the Group criticizes the council's handling of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC), highlighting concerns about the committee's apparent exclusion from significant decision-making processes. By sidelining the LPPC, the council risks bypassing important checks and balances, raising questions about the integrity of the Local Plan's development.

A central focus of the group's critique is the contentious issue of Green Belt development. They accuse the council of disregarding public opinion and pressing ahead with plans to build on protected Green Belt land without adequately demonstrating the exceptional circumstances required by National Planning Policies. This, they argue, not only threatens valuable green spaces but also reflects a disregard for community sentiment.

In addition to these overarching concerns, the Group points to specific discrepancies in the council's representation of housing needs and affordability. They highlight the council's reliance on inflated housing figures and failure to explore alternative solutions, such as maximizing brownfield sites. This, they argue, calls into question the accuracy and integrity of the data informing the Local Plan.

Epsom Green Belt calls for immediate action from elected councillors to address these concerns and restore public confidence in the Local Plan process. They emphasize the need for transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making to ensure that the interests of residents and the environment are adequately represented.

The full case being argued by Epsom Green Belt can be accessed [HERE](#).

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## Police probe abuse of public funds



Suspected fraud and alleged breaches of procedure in **Guildford Borough Council's** housing maintenance team have snowballed, culminating in a police investigation.

Last year, the council instigated a staff investigation following what was described as "an issue" within the housing maintenance department of Guildford and Waverley Borough Councils. They share services as part of a cost-cutting drive.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service understood at the time that staff had been suspended, contracts terminated and possible fraud examined. **Surrey Police** previously confirmed it had escalated its fraud investigation to a regional organised crime unit.

This week, the two councils announced they had received a report following a review of its housing maintenance team. It found 'serious areas of concern' which they said needed further investigation to determine whether correct governance processes were followed in the letting and management of housing maintenance contracts.

The councils have also announced that two strategic directors, Annie Righton and Ian Doyle, responsible for the relevant service area at the time contracts were let, have both agreed to step back on a temporary basis from their roles "to protect the integrity of the investigation".

However the councils said they were "unable to provide a copy of the confidential report" as it's "essential that the integrity of any investigatory process is upheld."

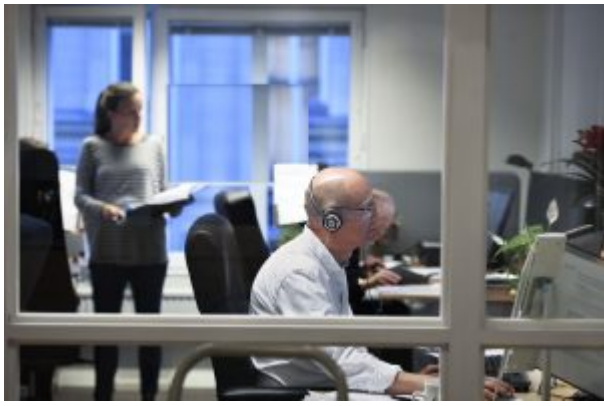
Leader of Guildford Borough Council, Councillor **Julia McShane** and Cllr **Paul Follows**, leader of Waverley Borough Council issued a joint statement. It read: "Public bodies need to be absolutely resolute in their commitment to openness, transparency and accountability for public money. We are determined to identify exactly what has happened in order to safeguard both councils and continue to deliver on our commitment to best value and service delivery possible for all our residents and businesses."

The councils joint chief executive, **Pedro Wrobel**, said: "When it comes to public money, nothing is more important than propriety and value. All monies should be used to deliver the best possible services for our residents and businesses. I will be working with officers, councillors, external investigators and auditors to get to the bottom of these issues and account for every penny. I will ensure the organisation has the right systems in place to safeguard the public's money, and will take robust action where necessary."

Related report:

[Good money goes after bad](#)

## Surrey's hotline for mental health



Ahead of Helpline Awareness Day (Friday, 23 February), Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and Surrey County Council are highlighting a local 24-hour NHS mental health crisis helpline that supports almost 50,000 people each year.

The Mental Health Crisis Helpline, run by Surrey and Borders Partnership, is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Since it started in 2010 it has helped around 600,000 people.

It is staffed by trained professionals who are ready to listen and offer advice, support and signpost to a range of community services.

A mental health crisis is when you feel at breaking point, and you need urgent help. You might be:

- Feeling extremely anxious and having panic attacks or flashbacks
- Feeling suicidal, or self-harming
- Having an episode of hypomania or mania, (feeling very high) or psychosis (maybe hearing voices, or feeling very paranoid)
- Other behaviour that feels out of control and is likely to endanger yourself or others

As well as the Mental Health Crisis Helpline, Surrey and Borders Partnership also provides five Safe Havens across Surrey which provide out-of-hours help and support to adults who are experiencing a mental health crisis or emotional distress.

These Safe Havens are in Aldershot, Epsom, Guildford, Redhill and Woking and are open evenings, weekends and bank holidays. Each one is staffed by a mental health practitioner from Surrey and Borders Partnership and two trained Safe Haven workers.

**Mark Nuti, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Health said:** *"We are committed to breaking the silence surrounding mental health and providing a safe, confidential and non-judgmental way for people in Surrey to seek help.*

*"We believe that mental health support should be available to everyone. No one should have to suffer in silence – the Mental Health Crisis Helpline is here for anyone who needs it.*

*"There is help out there, whether it's through the Mental Health Crisis Helpline or one of the Safe Havens. Let's break the silence and start the journey towards better mental health together."*

**Emily Hackett, Mental Health Crisis Line Service Manager said:** *"If you are experiencing a mental health crisis or emotional distress or if you have concerns regarding someone that you care for, please call us. Our dedicated crisis call handlers are on hand to support you 24 hours a day 7 days a week."*

If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health, don't hesitate to call the Mental Health Crisis Helpline on 0800 915 4644.

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## Here we go again on the Local Plan?



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has launched a dedicated FAQ section on its website to inform residents about the ongoing development of the borough's **Local Plan**. According to the Council this initiative aims to provide transparency and dispel any misinformation circulating regarding the plan's objectives and progress.

The Local Plan holds significant importance in shaping the future of the borough, covering various aspects such as job creation, environmental conservation, leisure facilities, housing sites, and infrastructure enhancements. The Council states that no final decisions have been made regarding policy formulations or site selections. Currently, the council is in the process of reviewing feedback received during the initial public consultation on the draft plan and gathering additional evidence to inform its development.

Councillor **Steven McCormick**, Chair of the Licensing & Planning Policy Committee, (RA Woodcote and Langley) emphasized the complexity and necessity of the Local Plan's development, stating:

*"The development of our Local Plan is as complex as it is vital. We want to make sure that all those who live in, work in and visit the borough have access to the latest information about the Local Plan, to ensure that they are informed and to dispel rumours and myths about the Plan. We encourage everyone to take a look at the FAQs, either on our website or by coming in to the Town Hall and asking for a copy at reception."*

On the key areas of most interest to residents the Council's position is stated and Epsom and Ewell Times summarises:

### Local Plan Decisions Still Pending

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) has yet to finalize decisions regarding policy formulation and site allocations for the upcoming edition of the Local Plan. Despite ongoing efforts to adhere to the government's planning framework and reviewing feedback from the Draft Local Plan consultation, no definitive choices have been made at this juncture. The council is actively engaged in compiling a comprehensive evidence base essential for the development of the Proposed Submission Local Plan, also known as the Regulation 19 Local Plan.

### Spatial Strategy Uncertain

Concerns loom over the confirmation of a Spatial Strategy crucial for guiding development across the borough. Originally slated for submission to Surrey County Council for transportation modeling by January 2024, the Spatial Strategy's confirmation has encountered hurdles. Following member briefings earlier this year,



the council has been unable to solidify the strategy, prompting a reevaluation of available options.

### Timeline for Local Plan Decisions

With the evidence base still under development, decisions regarding the Local Plan’s content are slated for later this year. The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) is expected to receive recommendations on the Proposed Submission Local Plan, incorporating site allocations, by November 2024. Subsequently, the LPPC will forward its recommendations to the Full Council for deliberation. Only upon Full Council approval will the plan proceed to another round of public consultation, marking a critical juncture in the decision-making process.

### Data Informing Local Plan Preparation

EEBC has relied on a diverse array of data sources to inform the preparation of the Draft Local Plan. Evidence spanning various thematic areas was gathered and published to support the consultation process. Additionally, ongoing efforts are underway to gather further evidence, with updates expected to be made available on the council’s website upon completion.

### Housing Needs and Requirements

Calculating the housing need for the borough involves employing the Government’s ‘Standard Method,’ which utilizes 2014 Household Growth Projections data. While recent updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) have reaffirmed the use of this method, the draft Local Plan aims to address just over half of the calculated housing need. This draft plan will undergo extensive scrutiny during the independent planning inspector’s examination.

### Current Housing Needs and Challenges

The borough faces challenges in meeting its housing targets, with housing delivery falling short of expectations. Despite efforts to address housing shortages, the Council’s Authority Monitoring Report highlights a deficit in housing delivery. Moreover, the increasing number of households on the housing needs register underscores the urgent need for affordable housing solutions.

### Brownfield Sites and Development

While brownfield sites play a crucial role in meeting development needs, there are concerns about their sufficiency. Although a range of brownfield sites has been considered for development in the next stage of the Local Plan, it is deemed insufficient to meet the borough’s housing and economic requirements.

### Preservation of Industrial Estates

Industrial estates such as Longmead and Kiln Lane are integral to the borough’s employment landscape and are safeguarded against housing development. Recognizing their importance in providing employment opportunities, the draft Local Plan designates these sites as Strategic Employment Sites, prioritizing their protection for employment-generating uses.

### Green Belt Protection

The Green Belt, governed by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), enjoys robust protection against development. However, authorities have the discretion to review and alter Green Belt boundaries under exceptional circumstances, subject to stringent conditions. Despite this flexibility, any proposed changes must demonstrate adherence to outlined criteria, ensuring the enduring preservation of Green Belt land.

The FAQs can be accessed on the council’s website at [www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/local-plan-faqs](http://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/local-plan-faqs).

Members of the public can sign up to receive an alert for future consultations by completing the form at <https://epsom-ewell.inconsult.uk/>.

### Opposition Voices Express Frustration Over Lack of Transparency

Cllr **Julie Morris**, Liberal Democrat group leader (College), expressed frustration over what she perceived as a lack of transparency and decisive action in the development of the Local Plan. She stated: “Some many months after several public protests about the inclusion of sites within the Green Belt, do we finally have some information about the status of our Local Plan, relatively bland though it is. Weasel words ‘no decision has been made on site selection’ need to be read alongside answers to a FAQ on the council’s website, where it quite clearly says that site options have been given to Surrey County Council (SCC) who are currently completing their transport modelling. These options may not be the final decision, but most councillors in Epsom & Ewell are not even aware of what these options are, so at this point in time SCC probably know more than us. The Liberal Democrat group of councillors remain frustrated and very concerned at the lack of transparency in decision-making from the party in control of the council – the Residents Association group.”

Cllr **Kate Chinn**, Labour group leader (Court), acknowledged the council’s recent efforts to inform residents about the Local Plan’s progress but criticized what she described as a history of secrecy surrounding decision-making processes. She stated: “It is good to see that the Residents Association (RA) councillors are finally starting the process of keeping residents informed on the progress of the local plan. The confidential briefings, which are shrouded in secrecy and leaks of information have fuelled the rumours, myths and conspiracy theories that prevail. With such a huge majority the ruling group should be able to develop a vision to present to residents that enables homes to be built to meet residents’ housing needs. Instead the borough continues to face uncertainty with the RA’s divisions, dither and delay meaning decisions are not made.. As the webpage notes ‘Following member briefings in early 2024, a Spatial Strategy was not able to be confirmed and therefore options are being considered.’

Without a spatial strategy the local plan is in effect paused. The lack of progress is endangering meeting the deadline to present a plan to the planning inspectorate by the 30th June 2025 leaving the council at the continued risk of unplanned, speculative development. The Labour group would happily contribute and work collaboratively to produce a local plan that sensibly addresses the borough’s acute housing need.”

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## New housing around Surrey’s cathedral in contention



A developer is arguing the benefits of 124 new homes next to **Guildford Cathedral** outweigh the potential harms to the heritage and green space.

Vivid Homes is appealing for a public inquiry to consider its planning application which was unanimously rejected by the council in March 2023.

The Cathedral, along with developer Vivid Homes, proposed to demolish the existing staff housing and create 124 homes in a mix of flats and housing – 54 of which would be affordable properties – on undeveloped woodland.

Officers at the Council in March 2023 recommended refusing the plans for a host of reasons including its harm to the heritage setting including the “visual prominence of the apartment blocks”, the impact on the “green collar” and the effect on the “silhouette” of the landmark.

Councillors decided it was ultimately not the right location for the development, even if the scheme offered affordable homes. Vivid Homes’ appeal contends that any harm identified has been minimised and should be balanced against the benefits.

The main appeals argue the visual prominence of the development will blend with the heritage asset. Apartment blocks and roofscapes will “sit within the

landscape”. Reducing building heights, landscaping and tree planting were also cited as ways to keep the green collar and “longer-distant views” towards and around the Cathedral.

A council report noted that the submitted design proposals would “harm the landscape character and the visual experience of the site to the east”, but would “benefit” the approach to the cathedral from the west.

The council concluded that the proposals would “still result in moderate adverse landscape and visual effects” concerning Surrey Hills as an area of natural beauty.

The proposed development as submitted would “continue to harm ‘important views’” in relation to the character and heritage assets of Guildford Town Centre, the council added.

The Guildford Society, a civic group promoting high standards in planning and architecture, said it was “disappointed” at hearing the news that the developers had appeal the decision, in late October 2023.

The urban planning organisation said it had two major concerns: the visual impact of the development on Guildford’s iconic skyline and the infrastructure supporting the development.

A spokesperson said: “The classic view of Guildford Cathedral from the south with its grass area is not really replicated in any of the planning documents.” - There is “very little information” on how the development will look when viewed from afar.

Starting 5 March, the public inquiry will be conducted by a planning inspectorate and last ten days.

Vivid homes is footing the bill for the appeal, despite the application also made on behalf of Guildford Cathedral.

The acting dean, **Stuart Beake**, said when the appeal was announced: “[The] decision is crucial for us financially – if planning permission is granted it will mean that our reserves will receive some much needed funds as we can recoup all the money we have spent on fees. An endowment will be established which will provide funds for the routine maintenance and upkeep of the cathedral and that in turn means that our annual budget will start to break even or be in surplus.”

Guildford Cathedral has been operating with a financial deficit for several years which has exacerbated with the coronavirus pandemic and the refusal of planning developments. The cathedral said it was selling land surrounding its Grade II listed site to create an endowment fund to pay for maintenance costs.

A spokesperson from The Guildford Society said: “Planning applications should be viewed without prejudice of its financial background. Whether the cathedral is making money out of it or making a thundering loss is not a matter for the review.”

The application would have raised a £10m endowment for the cathedral, which it said would help fund the future of the cathedral.

However, it was highlighted during a public presentation that cash from this sale would only last five years. When combined with a separate sale, planners said, this would only raise 23 per cent of the budgeted maintenance costs.

According to Vivid Homes documents, the cathedral’s deficit at the end of 2022 was £116,000. It was predicted to reduce the deficit slightly to £100,000 in 2023 by looking at ways to increase income and reduce expenditure. Details of repairing costs provided by a Quinquennial Inspection have identified repairs costing a total of £3,585,000.

Guildford Cathedral and Vivid homes were invited to comment.

Related report:

Surrey County’s Cathedral citadel conserved...

Image: Grahame Larter

## Coroner catalogues care failures in diabetic death



**Surrey County Council (SCC)** has been accused of not taking its responsibilities seriously after an eighteen-year-old tragically died from diabetes.

**Jake Baker**, an 18-year-old with a learning disability and type 1 diabetes, died at home following Diabetic Ketoacidosis. He required residential care since the age of eight, under the guardianship of the council. An inquest concluded a catalogue of failures by Surrey County Council and other bodies contributed to Jake’s death.

The coroner found Surrey Care Leavers team and Children Services had failed to obtain information about Jake’s cognitive ability and his capability of managing his diabetes independently, a Prevention of Future Deaths report published this month reads.

Coroner **Caroline Topping** said: “I am not satisfied that Surrey County Council have undertaken a rigorous review of the circumstances of the death, nor that the risk of future deaths has been averted. The issues surrounding the inadequacy of Jake’s pathway plan have not been addressed comprehensively in the last 4 years. Training for personal advisers is not mandatory and is only now being rolled out.”

The court was not provided with copies of the training or any protocol to be assured of the adequacy of the training and its implementation.

The coroner said that Jake’s death was “avoidable” and was “contributed to by neglect”. In September 2018 Jake (then 17) was placed in a full-time residential placement at **Ruskin Mill College**.

At the time of his death, Jake was staying with family for a few days when he became seriously ill from uncontrolled diabetes. Jake’s mother and stepfather found him unresponsive. His family previously said “there is nothing that can take away the pain” of losing their son.

The days before his death were the first time he had stayed away from his care facilities for more than two nights in a row, since being placed in the care of Surrey County Council when eight years old, his family’s lawyers said.

He was entitled to a personal adviser who had a statutory duty to write a pathway plan for Jake, including consideration of how his health needs were to be met. However, when away from home, no advice was sought from specialist diabetes services to inform the pathway plan and no risk assessment was made for Jake having unsupported contact with his family and managing his diabetes, the coroner’s report concludes.

Meetings discussing Jake staying over at his family’s house without support were unminuted. The emails which refer to meeting decisions made no reference to any of the dangers inherent in Jake’s diabetic condition nor his ability to manage it unsupported. The family were also not given any advice or training on how to keep Jake safe if he became unwell nor any emergency contact numbers.

The coroner added: “The local authority employees held the mistaken belief that if Jake wanted to go home unsupervised once he turned 18 there was nothing they could do to stop him. No capacity assessment was undertaken in relation to Jake’s ability to make a decision to go home unsupported. In my opinion there is a risk that future deaths could occur unless action is taken”

Four years on from Jake’s death, the coroner found the process of obtaining learning disabilities diagnoses remains opaque and difficult as there is no protocol in relation to this. Vulnerable care leavers are at risk of being denied necessary support due to the confusion and delay teams accessing adult social care assessments.

Jake was assessed not to meet the threshold for SCC Transitions Team because a report containing his original disability diagnosis was lost. Children’s Services were unable to obtain an up to date diagnosis. He did not have the support of an adult social work team and this outcome was being challenged when he died.

Overnight from the 28 to the 29 December 2019, Jake developed diabetic ketoacidosis as a result of being hyperglycaemic in the preceding days. He began to vomit and required immediate hospitalisation. On 30 December 2019 the college was notified by his family that he was too ill to travel. The staff who were travelling to collect him were told to return to the college. His family was not told to take him to hospital.



He was last seen alive at 11pm and found dead at 3am on 31 December 2019. If Jake had been admitted to hospital at any time prior to 5pm on the 30 December 2019 he would have been successfully treated.”

The family claim that Jake’s death was avoidable if he had been admitted to hospital any time before 5pm on December 29. In a statement, the family said: “Losing Jake has been incredibly difficult for our family, especially as he died in our home at what should have been a happy time. We trusted Ruskin Mill Trust with Jake’s care, and we have been let down by them in the worst possible way.

“Jake was an enthusiastic and determined young man who always put his mind to things. As a family we did all we could to make sure that Jake was looking after himself and was well taken care of, but those that were put in charge of his care didn’t give us the information necessary to ensure Jake’s safety”

**Clare Curran**, SCC Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said: “Our deepest sympathies remain with Jake’s family and friends. The services provided to Jake fell short of what he and his family needed to keep him safe, and we are very sorry for our part in that. We have taken a number of actions over the past four years to improve our support for young adults leaving care and we will be responding to the Coroner outlining our action plan to prevent future deaths. While we have already made changes, we know there is still further to go and we will carefully consider the Coroner’s concerns as we take our next steps.”

Published on 14 February 2024, SCC have up to 56 days to formally respond to the coroner’s report and outline the service’s action plan.

## New Family Centre grows out of Nursery



For nearly 25 years **Epsom Methodist Nursery** has been providing early years childcare in the heart of Epsom – just two minutes from the town centre. Now the Nursery is entering an exciting new chapter in its history. As well as continuing to offer early years education for two to five year-olds the Nursery will become a **Family Centre**.

Following consultation with parents the Family Centre is planning to offer a broad range of activities and support including:

- A bumps and babies group for new parents providing ante-natal and post-natal support.
- Support groups for parents and carers of toddlers and young children.
- Courses and classes covering areas such as potty training, coping with challenging behaviours and family budgeting.
- Support for speech and language development.
- An affordable after-school club.
- A summer lunch club.

Already the Family Centre is running two stay-and-play groups for parents and young children and in April it is offering a free ‘Ready Steady Cook on a Budget’ course. With the cost of living rising, the FREE four-week course aims to support parents to provide easy, wholesome and healthy meals for the whole family whilst sticking to a budget.

The course will cover menu planning on a budget, planning the weekly shopping list, hands on experiences of creating easy recipes and top tips for saving money and time. The move to becoming a Family Centre has been made possible by a grant award from the Community Foundation for Surrey (CFS). CFS has arranged for the Netherby Trust and the Epsom and Ewell Community Fund to provide £12,450 which will match a contribution from Epsom Methodist Church. This money will help fund both the employment of a Family Centre Manager for the next year alongside the various activities that are planned.

Commenting on the grant award **Cara Golding**, the manager of Epsom Methodist Church Nursery, said:

“We are delighted to have secured this funding from the Community Foundation for Surrey. Our work with families at Epsom Methodist Nursery has shown us how committed parents are to their children and families and how keen they are to pick up ideas that will help them with the everyday and sometimes complex challenges that parenting can bring. Local agencies and public services are under pressure and services have been cut back. So the more we can do to provide practical help to parents and give children the best start in life the better. That is our mission.”

For further details on the ‘Ready Steady Cooking on a Budget’ course see

[https://www.instagram.com/emcfamilies?igsh=bnNpYnFzNzhzaHp4&utm\\_source=qr](https://www.instagram.com/emcfamilies?igsh=bnNpYnFzNzhzaHp4&utm_source=qr)

## A boozy blow to Epsom’s “gentrification”?



Epsom’s new B&M bargains store, formerly Wilko, can sell booze from 7am-11pm despite a resident’s concerns it could “attract the wrong crowd”. After entering administration last summer, the former Wilko branch was purchased by B&M in September 2023 in a re-brand.

Epsom and Ewell’s licensing committee unanimously granted an alcohol licence for the new B&M store, due to open 1 March, at a meeting held 12 February.

One resident, Neil Gandhi had objected stating: “[It] goes against the local plan to gentrify Epsom. A B&M bargain will attract more crime, shoplifting, litter and the wrong crowds to our beautiful town Epsom.”

Another resident from Hudson House, a nearby apartment building, said they already experience problems from people who buy alcohol late at night from Tesco and Co-op. They added people proceed to drink under their car park and walkway.

A statement from Keystone Law on behalf of B&M said: “The concept of gentrification and what is ‘the wrong crowd’ is somewhat subjective and, in any event, is not strictly relevant to the Licensing Objectives.”

The national discount retailer sells a range of products including food, electricals, homeware, furniture, DIY and a limited range of alcohol.

The committee heard the main risk of crime out of B&M is shoplifting, according to the B&M representative. This danger is mitigated by a one-way system and the alcohol aisle placed at the centre of the premises, preventing potential shoplifters from rushing in and out of the store.

The application was granted despite Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) raising concerns on the effect of the “early” licensing hours on “teenagers and the school run at that time in the morning”.

Although the licensing hours expand between 7am-11pm seven days a week, the applicant stated the store would “generally” operate from 8am-7pm Monday to Saturday and 10:30am to 4:30pm on Sundays.

During peak trading periods, such as Christmas celebrations in December, the applicant’s trading hours are extended to 11pm closing time subject to customer demand.

While he was content with the 11pm cut-off, Cllr Neale said: “I would rather see the early hour one made a little bit tighter than 7am.”

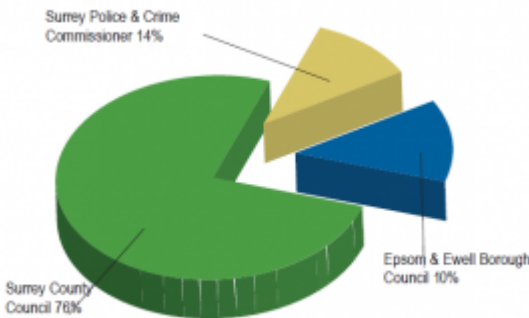
The B&M representative explained the 7am start catered towards customers who shop earlier due to shift work patterns. He added that the sale of alcohol is an important part of the store’s offer because it “wants to ensure B&M is a one-stop shop.”

Related report:

Another news in store for Epsom!

Image: Credit: Google street view. Former Wilko store to open as B&M bargains applies for alcohol licence.

# No budging on Council budget



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council met for two hours Tuesday 13th February to debate the proposed budget and Council tax increase for 2024/2025. Councillors received a 288 page report containing all the facts and figures. All the recommendations were approved.

It boils down to this:

A. Epsom and Ewell’s share of Council Tax goes up the equivalent of 2.99% – the maximum the law allows. (£6.57 for a Band D property – the most populous in the Borough).

B. Councillors’ basic allowance goes up 50%, from £4031.70 to £6081.11. Chairs and Vice-chairs of committees get additional allowances ranging from 30% to 100% of the basic members’ allowance.

C. Council staff salaries will increase 6%.

Reacting to the budget, leader of the Labour Group Cllr. **Kate Chinn** (Court Ward) said: “I’m sure the residents of Epsom and Ewell will have noted the residents’ association are putting up council tax, part of which will pay for the huge pay rise they voted through for themselves last night. However, the cost of the pay rise is relatively small when compared to the huge amounts spent on temporary housing for homeless people due to this council’s abject failure to build social housing.”

During the debate she said: “When we look at the staff for the council getting a 6% pay rise and having had raises very much less than inflation over the last five, six, seven, maybe even longer more years, I feel very uncomfortable awarding myself this large pay rise. It doesn’t seem right. It doesn’t sit comfortably with my values.”

Cllr **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) said: “Our staff get an annual pay review. Reading through this report, councillors have not taken an increase in their allowance for the past 10 years. So whereas our staff have been getting a regular review, it may well not hit the rate of inflation, they have been getting an increase. We as councillors have not. So unfortunately, whether Councillor Chinn accepts the point, the reason for such a large increase is to catch up with the choices that this Council has made not to accept that remuneration in the past.”

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town Ward) proposed the 2.99% increase in EEBC’s Council Tax and said in a wide ranging speech: “The current government has been less than helpful in creating stability and allowing good financial forecasting”. After noting several changes of top Council officers he said: “It’s not often you see so much change in a senior management team in such a short time. Everyone is going to need time and space to readjust, learn to work effectively and efficiently together to bring both stability to the council and its workforce, and to have the confidence to introduce changes and take the best advantage of opportunities that arise.”

On the budget he remarked: “Government has also capped for many years the increase in council tax, which traditionally had been the way to meet increased costs. We have had to use reserves to balance the budget over the last few years, and reserves don’t last forever. We still have a small budget gap and are forecasting the use of reserves to fill that gap, but we’re also taking steps to increase revenue as well as making savings.”

On homelessness he said: “Without adequate funding, we cannot achieve what we set out to do, and homelessness will continue to rise. A particularly worrying trend is the increase in young people who find themselves homeless. If the government is serious about reducing homelessness, they need to fund local authorities to enable them to achieve this.”

For the LibDems Cllr **Alison Kelly** (Stamford) touched on a wide variety of topics: “Why has a rewrite of the rules for spending the community infrastructure levy funds money meant that we’ve had to cancel a 12-month period for spending any of it? Sadly, to an outside observer, the answer seems to be that we can’t spend any money as we need the interest to fund the general services. This is not sustainable in avoiding the filing of notice of bankruptcy as has happened elsewhere.” She added: “Many councils are in danger of bankruptcy, and recent league tables show that we are mid-table with nearly £800 of debt per person. The Resident Association plan to resolve this seems to be the anticipated £500,000 increase in revenue from car parks, aspiration at best and a fantasy at worst, as this comes even though we expect to be nearly £200,000 down on last year’s budgeted income.”

She used the opportunity once more to have a go at Council secrecy: “Our Council group feels there are some unfathomable instances of resorting to allegedly legally privileged information which is then weaponized to keep an entire topic secret. There is no secret about needing to review the sites available to developers as part of the local plan, and there would be almost nil cost in keeping the public abreast of how the in-house meetings on this topic are progressing.”

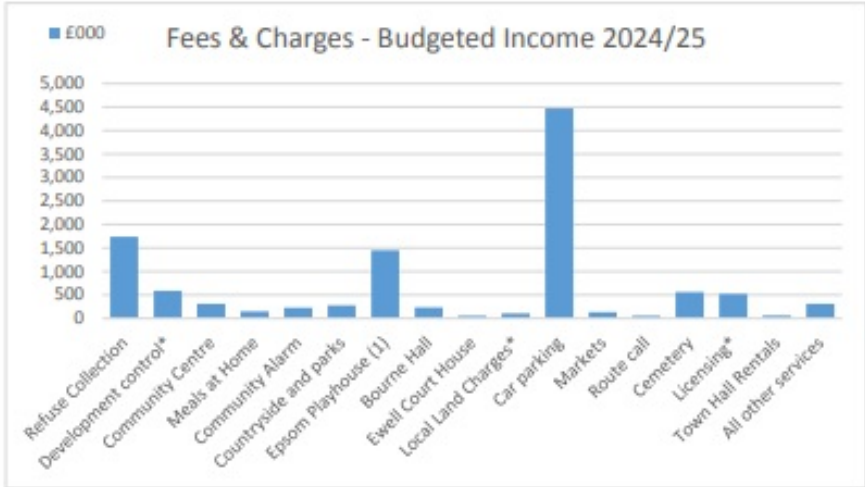
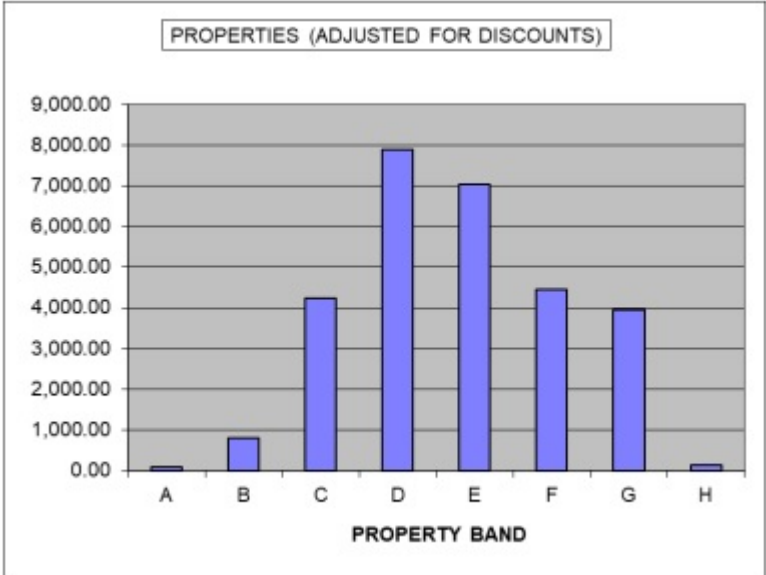
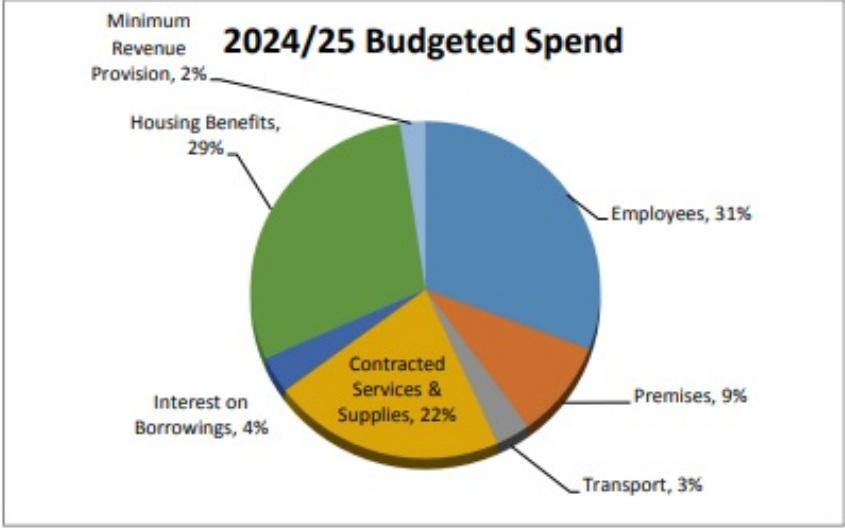
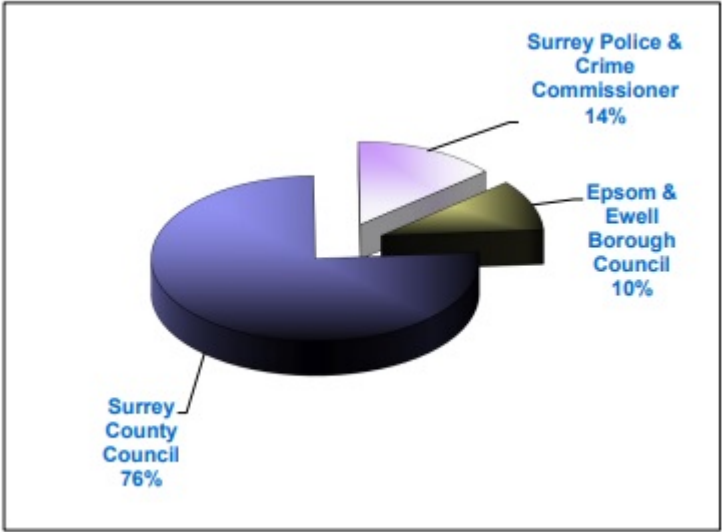
For Labour Cllr **Chris Ames** (Court Ward) said: “I understand it’s regularly alleged at these times that Labour doesn’t understand the need to find more money to meet the needs of residents. We absolutely do, but we don’t think it should be done by transferring budget pressures to the people we are elected to serve. The cost of living crisis hasn’t gone away just because the current inflation figures have fallen. Not only is the current 4 or 5% still far too high, it means that over the last year, prices rose over and above where they were after a period of double-digit inflation.

We still have large numbers of residents unable to feed their families or relying on food banks to do so. We still have residents who lie awake at night wondering how they’re going to pay their bills, their rents, or mortgages.”

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) said: “Financial mismanagement has serious consequences, which we have witnessed on multiple occasions in recent times. However, we should err on the side of caution. We’re introducing measures which may prove to be counterproductive.

As stated in the report, the major challenge is the delivery of the £1.4 million of additional income and savings and finding a further 0.5 million reduction in council’s net exponential by 2027/28. However, the council has acquired a number of commercial properties both within and outside the borough through borrowing. As of the end of 2022/23, the council’s external debt totalled £64.4 million, and the interest paid to service this debt was £1.6 million last year. We’re still facing economic uncertainty. Should we really be taking or amassing more borrowing debts in this current climate?”

Here are some graphics from the report that may put some matters in perspective:



The Council continues to benefit from its property investments and car parking income to maintain its finances in relative good order compared with other Boroughs in Surrey. Several of which face serious financial challenges: E.g., : Woking, Guildford and Spelthorne.

For 2023/2024 Epsom and Ewell’s share of Council tax was third lowest in the County.



2023-2024 COUNCIL TAX (average per dwelling and Band D for 2 adults)						
SURREY DISTRICT	£					
	Surrey County Council	Surrey Police	District Council Charge (Band D)	Average Parish Precept (Band D)	Local Average (Band D)	Average Council Tax (Band D)
Runnymede	1,675.08	310.57	184.92	0.00	184.92	2,170.57
Spelthorne	1,675.08	310.57	216.04	0.00	216.04	2,201.69
Epsom & Ewell	1,675.08	310.57	219.60	0.00	219.60	2,205.25
Mole Valley	1,675.08	310.57	199.19	40.44	239.63	2,225.28
Guildford	1,675.08	310.57	192.41	60.90	253.31	2,238.96
Elmbridge	1,675.08	310.57	243.35	14.15	257.50	2,243.15
Surrey Heath	1,675.08	310.57	240.65	21.54	262.19	2,247.84
Woking	1,675.08	310.57	263.12	0.00	263.12	2,248.77
Tandridge	1,675.08	310.57	237.88	28.95	266.83	2,252.48
Waverley	1,675.08	310.57	201.64	75.49	277.13	2,262.78
Reigate & Banstead	1,675.08	310.57	249.71	38.74	288.45	2,274.10

- Related reports:
- “Audit and Scrutiny” under scrutiny

A question of pay for Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Surrey’s debts match Woking’s but its position is secure?

Relative relief about Epsom and Ewell’s debt?

Surrey Borough running up big debts

Tory leader pleads with Tory Government

## Epsom 3rd in a 2024 “Best Places to Live”



In the latest edition of national estate agents “Garrington’s Best Places to Live” index for 2024, Epsom has clinched the third spot after an assessment of rankings in a range of categories.

Garrington’s evaluation of **over 1400 locales** across England and Wales underscores Epsom’s strengths in various key aspects, including heritage, wellbeing, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and housing affordability.

With its longstanding association with the prestigious Derby and a rich historical backdrop, Epsom ranks high in heritage, landing at 90th place. Its commitment to community wellbeing, supported by a serene natural environment, earns it a respectable 282nd position in this category.

Moreover, Epsom’s strategic location near London, coupled with its excellent schools and robust job market, positions it favorably in terms of employment prospects and connectivity, securing the 99th spot in Garrington’s evaluation.

While property prices in Epsom reflect its status, with the average family home costing £810,809, a modest 0.4% increase in the past year underscores its resilience amidst market fluctuations.

According to Garringtons: “As the real estate landscape evolves, Epsom maintains its reputation as a stable and desirable locale, offering residents a blend of tradition, convenience, and quality of life.”

Jonathan Hopper, CEO of Garrington Property Finders, emphasizes the practical significance of the 2024 ranking, stating, “As the market stabilizes and borrowing costs decrease, buyers are re-evaluating their options. Garrington’s guide offers insights to help individuals identify locales that meet their needs and preferences.”

“Epsom remains attractive to homebuyers with its solid fundamentals and promising prospects for a fulfilling lifestyle.”

- Related reports:
- Housing need or desire?

Anchored in reason on local housing need?