

## Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Our Star shines on Epsom Playhouse



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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Glyn students brighten the Borough



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

Ten local secondary school students recently worked in collaboration with the council and international graffiti artists from **Positive Arts** to create a large scale mural celebrating the biodiversity within our borough. The artwork has dramatically improved the aesthetics of the building, which previously looked tired and in need of renovating.

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

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

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

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

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

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## ULEZ compliant taxis for Epsom and Ewell



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An officers' report into the policy said they had not been able to find any special exemption for limousines in Transport for London guidelines. They said there wasn't justification for a blanket exemption for such cars and recommended they be looked at on a case-by-case basis when making a licensing decision.

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

From January 1, 2025 the council will not renew licences for diesel vehicles not meeting or exceeding Euro 5 emission standards, and from From July 1, 2026



licences, including renewals, will only be granted to vehicles which meet the Petrol Euro 4 and Diesel Euro 6 standards, with some exceptions.

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

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

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Image Google street view Epsom Station taxis

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cllr **Muir** (Conservative Horton) a non-member of the committee was given three minutes to make a statement and said: “It is critical when deciding whether or not to unpause the local plan drafting process ... that council has clarity over the objectives for the next draft and the key changes required to achieve those objectives. So, what do we need to decide before unpauseing?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related Reports:

Motion to pause Local Plan process

Cllr McCormick’s own answers on Local Plan

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# Another Surrey Local Plan Pauses



The towns, villages, and open spaces that will take the brunt of **Surrey Heath Borough Council’s** 6,000 new homes will be kept under wraps a little longer after the local authority kicked its housing plan into touch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related reports:

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

Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

Gove flexing his muscle on a Local Plan?

Spelthorne’s neediest lose out on housing

Motion to pause Local Plan process (Epsom and Ewell)

Image: ffaalumni CC by ND 2

# Gove: meddling and muddled over Surrey Local Plans?



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

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

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

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

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

She said during this time “major reforms” were being proposed by central government “which seem to change with the wind”.

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

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

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

Cllr Sexton attached a list of more than 60 local planning authorities that have now paused or withdrawn their local plans “as a result of this chaos and mixed messaging”. She asked if the minister was “mistaken” when she declared in her letter that Spelthorne would be left with one of the oldest local plans in the

country and highlighted other areas where the Secretary of State had not intervened, including in Basildon and Castle Point.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related reports:

Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge

Gove flexing his muscle on a Local Plan?

Spelthorne’s neediest lose out on housing

Motion to pause Local Plan process (Epsom and Ewell)

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

## Land, plan and a scam mess for Tandridge



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

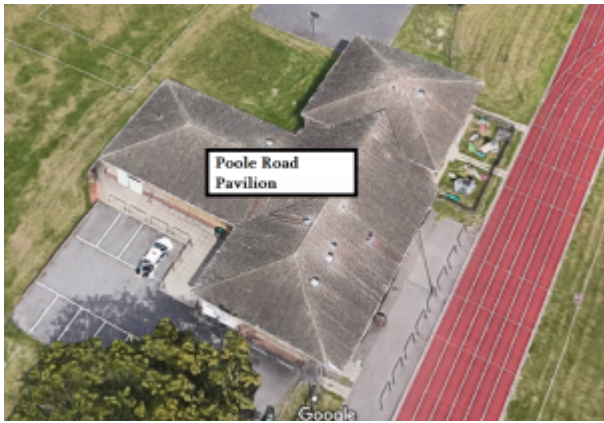
The meeting unanimously agreed to ask the inspector for a report, rather than withdrawing the plan, and will recommend this to council. Full council will debate the next steps for the plan, its next scheduled meeting is on Thursday, October 19.

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



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## Costs through the roof enquiry for local Council



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last two items on the agenda, included the Commercial Tenant Update and the Commercial Property Update were discussed in private as they "pertain (ed) to information related to the financial or business affairs of specific individuals or entities."

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## Painting a rosy picture for recycling



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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