

## County CEO’s pay rise triggering strikes?



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

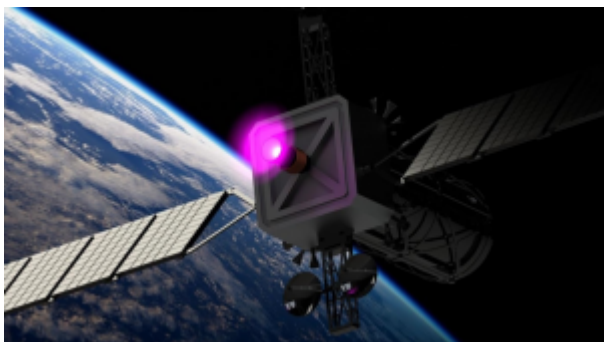
Addressing the increase to the CEO’s salary a spokesperson for the council said that its focus was on providing the best possible services to 1.2m residents of Surrey, and to ensure it does this, needs to have the best people in senior positions.

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

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

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## Surrey’s “Tugs in Space!”



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surrey University Press Office

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## The knives are out in Woking



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile the knives and forks have sat unused in drawers.

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

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



Opinion by County Councillor **Eber Kington**:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Top image: Epsom Family Centre within Pound Lane School.

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## Stretching Epsom taxi ULEZ exemption



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

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

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

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

Related reports:

Emissions a taxing issue for Council

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## Pause for thought on paused Plan



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related Reports:

Motion to pause Local Plan process

Public meeting on Local Plan dominated by greenbelters.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Draft Local Plan.

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## Anyone for tennis? If you pay.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The LTA has estimated the uptake annual subscriptions in the borough to be £1400 with annual income generated from the courts estimated at £27,107.

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

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

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

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

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

Image: kance CC BY 2.0

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## Surrey’s vulnerable money support



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related reports:

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

Cost of living crisis fails to reach the Surrey summit

Will Epsom's Foodbank ever end?

Image: globalmoments

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### How does it work?

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

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

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

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

## Surrey Youth Arts and Culture Festival



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

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

Image: A youth consultation evening with young people

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

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

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

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

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

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

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