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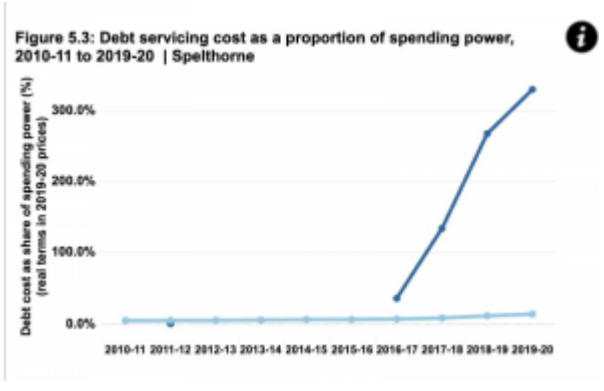
Accountants shortage blamed for Surrey's rising debts

8 July 2023



The scale of the financial problems unearthed by initial forensic exams of Woking Borough Council's left many shocked. The council's accounts had not been signed off by an independent auditor for more five years as part of a national shortage of qualified accountants that has left a high backlog across local government bodies.

Meanwhile, the borough's chief financial officer warned things could get worse as they uncover more.

On June 23, the Public Accounts Committee said that delays to publishing audited accounts increases the risk of governance or financial issues being identified too late, and hinders accountability for £100billion in local government spending, with knock-on impacts for central government and the NHS.

It led to the committee's deputy chairperson asking "how many more horror stories such as Croydon, Slough, Thurrock, and more recently the shocking case of Woking council are there remaining undetected?"

Following the report, the LDRS looked at three other Surrey councils with either high levels of borrowing, or that had experienced recent write-downs in the value of their assets and asked if residents can be confident their councils won't go bust too.

Woking Borough Council – £1.7bn estimated debt in 2022, expected to rise to £2bn. There has also been an "absence of external audit opinions on the council's accounts" since 2018/19. The majority of the council's debt was built on complicated development deals. It borrowed hundreds of millions to pay companies it owned for town centre regeneration projects. It also funded its own loss-making businesses. Like many council's Woking's central funding fell significantly over the past decade.

According to the **National Audit Office** its Government-funded spending power dropped 69.2 per cent in the past decade. To counter this, it embarked on an investment strategy to cover the deficit, regenerate its town centres, and maintain non-statutory services.

In 2019/2020, the council received £6.7m from the Government, £9.9m from council tax and £28.7m from its investments.

The problem was that it spent £17.7m on services, £6m on minimum revenue provision, and £33.1m just on the interest on its debts.

The Public Audits Committee published the "Timeliness of local auditor reporting" on June 23, three weeks after Woking Borough Council issued its section 114 notice declaring it could no longer balance its books.

Chairperson, **Dame Meg Hillier** MP, said: "Our Committee warned in 2021 that the system of local government audit was close to breaking point. Disappointingly, since then the situation has only gotten worse. The cases of Croydon, Slough, Thurrock and Woking councils all should serve as flashing red signals for the Government, and our report finds that the rot risks spreading to central government finance and the NHS.

Deputy chairperson **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** MP,said: "How many more horror stories such as Croydon, Slough, Thurrock, and more recently the shocking case of Woking council are there remaining undetected, which ultimately always have to be bailed out at huge costs to the taxpayer? The fragility of the number of qualified people and firms tending to carry out these important audits means that the system will only get worse before it gets better."

Spelthorne Borough Council – £1bn debt as of 2022, last set of audited accounts signed off: 2017/18. In 2022, there were nine local authorities with borrowing of more than £1bn.

They were either major population centres, Transport for London, Birmingham, Greater London Authority, Leeds, Warrington, Edinburgh, and South Lanarkshire, or bankrupt; Woking.

The other is Spelthorne Borough Council, with a debt of £1,084,655.00 and a capital programme under review from central government. Last week, it emerged that £50m development plans for Thameside House has now jumped to £80m – mirroring, albeit on a smaller scale, Woking's Victoria Square development originally budgeted to cost £150m but now stands at £750m and a book value of around half that.

Since 2010, Spelthorne's Government funded spending power has fallen 66.3 per cent creating the same environment of needing to find alternative funding or reduce services. The council borrowed £1bn over a three-year period from the Public Works Loans Board and income from its investments brought in £55.3m in 2019/20 – out of a total of £72.8m. That allows the council to spend £16m on services while paying off £24.2m in interest payments with £11.1m set aside to pay off the principle.

The sustainability of the strategy is less obvious with the council's debt servicing as a proportion of spending power climbing to 328.1 per cent, higher than even Woking's 295.2 per cent for the same 2019/20 year. A spokesperson for

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Spelthorne Borough Council said: “The financial situation is significantly different between Spelthorne and Woking Borough Council. Spelthorne has taken steps to ensure that the commercial property programme is sustainable, and our investment model is very different. We have always taken a cautious approach, paying down debt on a year-by-year basis (like a mortgage) and ensured that the council has fully complied with the CIPFA requirements for Minimum Revenue Provision. The council took a long-term strategic view to acquire key investment and regeneration properties in order to generate income to support and fund council services, affordable housing, and regenerations programmes.

“We save up funds over a long-term time frame and have set aside £37.8m sinking fund to cover potential dips in income. Spelthorne Council has the highest ratio of usable reserves to net revenue budget of any district or borough council in the country.”

Runnymede Borough Council: £600m debt as of 2022, last set of audited accounts: 2018/19
Runnymede Borough Council is awaiting the findings of a Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Committees report into its finances and its strategy to borrow heavily for town centre redevelopment projects.

It is another council that followed the investment/redevelopment route, in part to cover the 55.5 per cent decrease in its Government-funded spending power. High profile developments such as Addlestone One and the Egham Town Centre have changed their local areas with new shopping centres, hotels and cinemas. But they have also resulted in the council’s debt servicing costs climbing to 168.9 per cent, about half of the levels in Woking or Spelthorne but still way above the national average of 13.4 per cent for local authorities.

The investments brought in £28.1m in 2019/20, from a total of £40.8m in income, which covers the borough’s £13.4m spending on service as well as its £11.1m in interest repayments and £3.2 for the principal.

A spokesperson for Runnymede Borough Council said it “only undertakes borrowing where it is prudent and affordable. Our current capital programme, approved in February 2023, does not include any new major schemes that require additional borrowing. We have a robust policy covering the repayment of debt, which is reviewed annually as part of the budget process and is included in all the council’s financial plans. We continue to set a balanced budget and to hold sufficient reserves to manage known risks alongside contingency for unforeseen events.

“The local government sector is suffering from the effects of the backlog in the audit profession. The Council is still awaiting final sign off for its 2019/20 accounts. “Since 2010 there have been significant cutbacks to local government funding. We calculate the loss of revenue support grant to be in excess of £5million, which equates to a third of our net budget. This has been partially offset by other grants, but only modestly. To protect services, we have had to raise our own sources of income whilst making efficiencies.”

Surrey Heath Borough Council: £51m debt at 2022, last set of audited accounts 2018/19. Debt levels in 2022 stood at £51m, putting Surrey Heath Borough Council in a different position compared with Woking, Spelthorne and Runnymede. However, it has since emerged in unaudited accounts that its debt grew to £160m and its biggest asset dropped by £79m. This prompted the council to announce it was updating its property acquisition strategy despite its government-supported funding dropping by 60 per cent in the last decade.

This change in approach is taking place even though its 2019/20 debt servicing levels were comparatively low among Surrey peers at 41.8 per cent – although its debt levels have since climbed. The council balanced its books in a more conventional manner with just £3.3m of its £15.5m income coming from its investments that year. This covered the £9.96m to run its services, with £2.3m paid in interest and £2.2m set aside to pay off the debt.

A spokesperson for Surrey Heath Borough Council it was considered to have a “sound strategy for debt management as per the annual Treasury Strategy agreed at Council in February. We are not interlinked with Woking Council and therefore it is considered that no changes are required. The Medium Term Financial Strategy approved at February council contains a minimum revenue provision for future debt repayment. This has been calculated in accordance with central government and CIPFA guidance.

They added: “The council no longer receives any revenue support grant from central Government. The council retains business rate income, but also has to pay a tariff on this to central government. It is difficult to put a £ and % figure on this as the real term reduction is a great deal higher than the actual cash reduction.”

The committee report concluded that the backlog of audit opinions for local government bodies remains unacceptably high, and that there is still no plan to reduce it.

Only 12 per cent of local government bodies received their audit opinions in time to publish accounts for 2021–22 within the already extended local authority accounts publication deadline.

Derby disrupter doesn’t quite go down

8 July 2023



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Ben Newman ran onto the Epsom racecourse seconds after the starter gates opened on the 3rd June 2023 Derby flat-race. Though the horses were still out of sight by the time several security and police officers dragged him off in front of the Grandstand, his act was prosecuted as a public nuisance.

Appearing in custody before Recorder David Ockelton at Guildford Crown Court he was sentenced today (6th July).

The court heard from Wendy Cottee prosecuting that it was only the swift action of security and police that ensured the race itself proceeded undisturbed. Nevertheless, it was clear from video and audio footage that many members of the public were “seriously annoyed”. She also told the court that Newman had sent an appeal on social media calling for a large number of sympathisers of “Animals Rising” to join him in his protest. An appeal the Judge commented had not been successful.

Defending Mr Nick Goss said that Newman was passionate and well intentioned. He did not intend to create danger but only to protest. His time in custody since 3rd June had been a “salutary lesson” and caused him to reflect on his actions.

Newman has been arrested over the last year in connection with various sporting events and was on bail with a condition not to attend public sporting events on 3rd June. Mr Goss stated that none of these investigations had led to any criminal charges.

The Judge said to Newman “The proud liberties of our constitution have limits – you went beyond those limits. There was a clear danger to police and security. You could not predict how long it would take them to remove you.”

“The offence is serious with a maximum of 10 years. However, I will make the sentence as short as possible. It will be 18 weeks and it will be suspended for 2 years.”

The court ordered Newman to undertake 80 hours community service and to pay costs of £1800 and a victim surcharge of £126.

Met poaches Surrey police claims Commissioner

8 July 2023



Surrey has more police officers than ever before despite attempts by the Met to “poach” officers, according to the county’s Police and Crime Commissioner. **Lisa Townsend** told a meeting of the Police and Crime panel on Thursday (June 29) there were challenges around retention in the force and what was being done to address them.

But she said Surrey Police had beaten a government uplift target by 136 officers. Mrs Townsend described it as a “deliberate move” to over-recruit because officers in Surrey faced issues such as competitive wages and a high cost of living.

With the Met Police “offering quite large sums of money” to try to “poach” Surrey officers, Mrs Townsend pointed to targeted adverts on Surrey trains as one tactic used by the London force.

With 2,325 officers, she said the force was bigger than it had been before. Mrs Townsend spoke more than once in the meeting about the need for police to attend fewer non-critical mental health call outs.
She said “pushing forward” with work to reduce police attending such calls would help with both recruitment and retention in Surrey.

The commissioner said: “People are coming in [to policing] because they want to catch the bad guys, they want to prevent crime, they want to protect the public. Increasingly they are being asked to do what is social work, particularly around mental health and concerns for welfare.”

Tandridge District Councillor **Richard Smith**, a former police officer, described officer retention as “like lemmings falling of a cliff”. He claimed in most organisations senior management “won’t tell the truth from what’s being said at the bottom end of the company because it makes them look bad”.

Mrs Townsend responded to say she spent a lot of time both with those at the top of the force and out on attachment with officers who she said she hoped were comfortable talking to her about the challenges. She said: “They do like to have a good whinge, and I am more than happy to listen. So I think we do have a pretty good grasp.”

With 395 officers having joined the force since 2019, **Cllr Alex Coley**, a member of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**, asked for the number of officers who had left in that period.

But Mrs Townsend didn’t give an answer on how many had left the force, saying the “total uplift” was what really mattered and it was “totally normal” to lose officers to retirement and other factors. Her office committed to giving the

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number to Cllr Coley after the meeting.

Mrs Townsend outlined measures to keep officers including adding to the force's estates plan to provide more affordable homes, which 85 per cent of officers asked had said was important to them.
Image: Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend at the Surrey Police and Crime Panel budget hearing

Image: Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend at the Surrey Police and Crime Panel budget hearing

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ULEZ court challenge begins

8 July 2023



The coalition of councils opposed to expansion of the ULEZ to outer London is optimistic of success on the first day of its legal challenge.

Representatives from the five councils – Bexley, Bromley, Harrow, Hillingdon and Surrey – met on the steps of the High Court in central London on Tuesday 4 July, ahead of the opening day of the Judicial Review the coalition has brought against TfL and the Mayor of London, over planned expansion of the ULEZ to outer London.

The coalition's case will be argued on three grounds:

- Failure to follow statutory procedure – Schedule 23 Greater London Authority Act 1999
- Unlawful and unfair consultation regarding expected compliance rates in outer London
- Unlawfulness regarding scrappage scheme, including failing to consider a buffer zone, irrationality and inadequate consultation.

Through the new proposals, anyone driving a non-compliant vehicle in the expanded zone after the scheduled start date on Tuesday 29 August, would stand to be charged £12.50 per day – whether the journey is a 30-mile commute, or a short trip for essential groceries.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Transport, Infrastructure and Growth at Surrey County Council, said: "*I'm pleased that our hearing begins today, as we continue to highlight the significant financial and social impacts expansion of the ULEZ scheme would have on many of our residents and businesses.*

"*However, it is very disappointing that it has had to come to this. Our concerns have never been addressed by The Mayor, forcing these legal proceedings in order to have the voice of our residents heard.*

"*We remain committed to delivering a greener future, but it must be done in a practical and sustainable way. We will now await the findings of the High Court.*"

The hearing is scheduled to last for two days, with a ruling from the judge expected to follow at an unconfirmed date but expected ahead of the courts break for summer on 28 July.

Related Reports:

ULEZ driving old cars to Epsom market

Challenge to ULEZ gaining grounds

Many Surrey motorists will be paying the ULEZ charge.

ULEZ Court battle looming

Confusing debate on police attending mental health calls

8 July 2023

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An ex-police officer has responded to **Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner**'s calls for coppers to attend fewer mental health call outs – saying the first murder he attended was initally a non-critical mental health call.

Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner, **Lisa Townsend**, recently called for officers to stop attending every mental health call out, saying officers are being taken off the front line. She has called for the "Right Care, Right Person" model to be introduced, following the Metropolitan Police also saying from August they will no longer attend mental health call outs where there is not a threat to life.

Councillor **Richard Smith**, a Tandridge District Councillor, said he had been a police officer for 30 years and that he was in agreement with Mrs Townsend's comments. (*sic*)

Cllr Smith (Residents' Alliance, Burstow, Horne & Outwood) spoke at the annual meeting of Surrey County Council's Police and Crime Panel on Thursday (June 29). He said: "Probably the first murder I went to was a non-critical [mental health] call to a person who then decided to stab the nurse to death with a carving knife out of the kitchen. I feel that's where we are going to come unstuck when it comes to removing police from mental health calls."

Mrs Townsend responded that was "absolutely the right place for police to be" and there would always be a role for police to play in such cases. But she said police officers should not be attending where there was a role for other agencies, such as adult social care or the NHS, to follow up.

Earlier in the meeting she had pointed to additional money given to the NHS for mental health support, which police don't get. But she was clear the police should not get additional money, in her opinion.

She said: "If somebody has broken their leg we would not expect them to be in the back of a police car. "If somebody is having a mental health crisis I do not want them in the back of a police car."

Mrs Townsend said she'd had "difficult" conversations with NHS representatives about police officers not being able to attend all mental health calls.

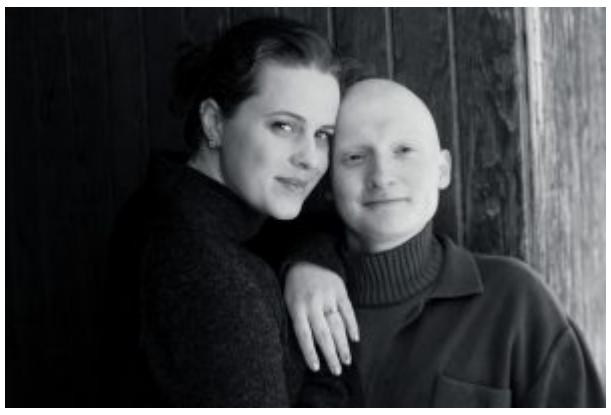
She told the meeting the difference was: "I'm not walking into A&E in St Peter's on a Friday night saying can we borrow a couple of nurses because we have got some burglaries that need solving in Woking?"

She said in February, officers spent 515 hours on incidents relating to mental health which was the highest number of hours ever recorded in a single month by **Surrey Police**.

Image: Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey Lisa Townsend. Surrey Live photographer Darren Pepe.

Running ahead of Crohn's disease

8 July 2023



"I didn't think I would ever be able to run 10k" said **Epsom man** and Crohn's disease sufferer **Harry Reed**. But he will now compete in the London race on 9 July to raise awareness of disease.

Last year, after a long battle with Crohn's Disease, 24-year-old Harry Reed weighed just 48kg. Today he is training for the ASICS London 10k and is in his best health of recent years. "I'm super excited," says Harry who is due to compete on July 9.

"My knee's been playing up recently, so I've had to take it easy over the last couple of weeks…but apart from that…I have a feeling it's going to go very well." Before [developing Crohn's] I was an athlete," says Harry who grew up in Epsom. "I was a county sprinter and I actually qualified for the county races."

After losing much of his strength due to illness Harry's race preparation now incorporates muscle training to help with his endurance. "All the strength that you'd normally build up in like your joints, I lost it. So, I'm currently doing a lot of work to kind of build up the strength in my ligaments, tendons and around my
knees and ankles."

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Crohn's Disease is a chronic condition which causes parts of the gut to become swollen and inflamed resulting in symptoms including pain, diarrhoea, weight loss and extreme tiredness.

Harry developed Crohn's in 2015 when, after a calf muscle injury, he contracted glandular fever later leading to the onset of his disease. The route to a diagnosis was not straight forward and Harry spent his GCSEs through to A levels in and out of hospitals. "They just couldn't figure it out because my blood tests weren't coming back with anything specific that was wrong," Harry says.

Harry was finally diagnosed in 2017, 2 years after his symptoms began. But, that year, during an initial surgery to treat the Crohn's, Harry developed life threatening infections of the blood and stomach lining known as sepsis and peritonitis. He was transferred from Epsom to St Helier's hospital for emergency surgery.

"I wasn't expected to live. So that was a bit of a miracle in itself…I had to basically say goodbye to my parents, my family at that time because we all knew that it wasn't good."

The complications did not end there. In 2019, Harry developed hair loss known as alopecia. He also experienced two rounds of failed drug treatments which led to a severe return of symptoms in 2022.

"My diet sort of got narrower and narrower about things that were okay for me to eat…by the end of September [2022], I had not been able to eat for a couple of weeks. I ended up going into hospital through A&E due to the backlog of patients with COVID."

Harry was given intravenous nutrition before undergoing further surgery to remove the problem part of his bowel. Thankfully the operation was a success, and it was in 2022 that Harry was able to rediscover
his love for running.

"When I first started…. it went terribly. But it felt great when I got back, to actually feel like I accomplished something or at least to have that sort of exercise endorphin release. Mentally the fog had been lifted for just a moment which was really great."

"As I was able to eat more, my body was able to take in more calories, my strength grew. By November of 2022 I was given the kind of all clear by my surgeon… It's been a blessing to be able to do it for myself and prove to myself that I can do it. I didn't think I would ever be able to run 10k so to be able to feel confident about doing a good job is so exciting."

Harry will run to raise awareness of the disease, which affects over 1 in 123 people in the UK*.

"It's an invisible illness – you'll never know if someone's got Crohn's," says Harry. "I think the tough thing… is realising the severity and the kind of the intensity that people suffer when it comes to the flare ups. It's something that is really hard to put into perspective. I think also the lack of energy that you have…it's like you have to work 10 times as hard. And most of the time your output is 10 times less. I think once you can be educated, you can then have empathy towards people and some more understanding".

Harry currently works as a creative director for a publishing house start-up based in Epsom, where he lives with his fiancé. His upcoming race will be the start of many, with plans to run the Bacchus Wine 10k at Denbies Wine Estate in September.

You can find out more about Harry's upcoming race at

https://limelightsports.club/event/asics-london-10k-2023.

*Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis – stats from Crohn's and Colitis UK

New Epsom theatre very open for business

8 July 2023



Set amidst rolling lavender fields, the **Lavender Theatre** will open for its inaugural summer season this July in **Epsom**. The theatre is located at 139 Reigate Road, Epsom KT17 3D

The 250-seat open air theatre will be home for an annual season of plays and musicals with a truly elegant backdrop. Based at Mayfield Lavender in Surrey, the theatre has been co-founded by director **Joe McNeice** (producer/director of 'DIVA: Live From Hell!'), Mayfield owner Brendan Maye and Jonathan Muir.

The inaugural season will open with Irving Berlin's classic musical '**Annie Get Your Gun**' from July 17, with music and lyrics by Irving Berlin, original book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields as revised by Peter Stone, with new direction and choreography by Simon Hardwick ('My Fair Lady').

The launch of the theatre will see the completion of a significant investment into the Epsom site, which already boasts a coffee bar, shop, and a full service glasshouse restaurant due to open alongside the theatre this summer.

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"This will be more than just a visit to a theatre," commented Joe McNeice, "Audiences will be able to grab a picnic to enjoy among the blossoming rows of lavender as the sun begins to set, before taking their seats in our covered auditorium to watch a show under the stars."

Since opening in 2006, the Mayfield Lavender Farm in Banstead has grown into a major summer destination for tourists and locals in South London, and this year the team are opening the gates to a theatre at their sister location in Epsom.

Lavender Theatre Artistic Director **Joe McNeice** worked behind the scenes at London's immersive 'Great Gatsby', and was Regent's Park Open Air Theatre's Visitor Services Manager until 2022, after graduating from the University of York in 2018.

"The whole place looks incredible, just walking about the site is a real treat for all the senses," McNeice added, "so our shows have to compliment their surroundings and match the sophistication that the natural landscape has set for us."

Speaking of his plans for 'Annie Get Your Gun', **Simon Hardwick** said: "The show will be a rip-roaring staging of the well known Broadway musical in a very raw and kinetic production that evokes the energy of Buffalo Bill's original touring celebrations of the Wild West. The Lavender Theatre will be a dream destination; an environment in which to enjoy a West End-standard production under a hazy summer sky."

The theatre, privately funded and managed by **Lavender Productions Ltd**., will produce its own shows with plans to see the summer season expand year on year with diverse and engaging programming.

McNeice said: "With no public funding or grants to help us achieve this mammoth project, we are relying solely on our Box Office income to build the Lavender Theatre into a profitable business, but we believe that creating a new producing theatre, a proper landmark location for the arts in Surrey, is something worth the investment, for both the local community and the wider industry.

"I'm really passionate about developing new shows, particularly musicals. The location is perfect because it's actually very close to London, but far enough away to have its own identity, which will give us the opportunity to develop work without the vast expense and pressure that comes with opening new shows in the capital. It's an incredibly exciting opportunity."

Tickets for the inaugural season are on sale today at lavendertheatre.com.

Epsom family Opened to a two degree challenge

8 July 2023



Joanna McLenaghan walked quite literally in her Epsom father's footsteps when she followed dad Ian across the stage to collect identical degrees recently at a ceremony staged by **The Open University**.

The pair signed up for an OU MSc in Maths in the same year and there followed six years of "total rivalry" to see who could get the best marks for assignments.

It's the third degree for Joanna, 36, who is now a data scientist managing a team of people at Gousto, the recipe box company.

She earned a first-class degree in physics at Oxford followed by a doctorate in the same subject from the University of St Andrews. But her latest achievement was hard won by burning the midnight oil whilst working full time.

Jo, as she is also known, says her OU degree was definitely a factor in her gaining her latest job at Gousto as she says employers know the "level of effort and commitment that you have to put in, particularly doing something over six years on top of a job. Whilst I already had the undergraduate degree and a PhD, I think as an employer, when you're looking through hundreds of applications having something like this on a CV really helps you to shine," she said.

Ian McLenaghan, 66, from **Epsom** in Surrey, is full of praise for his daughter: "I'm incredibly proud of her achievements. We might have started out on the same pathway but she's much more of a people person, who's capable of doing things like management. "That's something I avoided like the plague when I was working. I just wanted to go away in a cupboard somewhere and work on my own solving technical problems."

Yet Ian is something of an academic himself. He *also* has an Oxford degree in physics, and in the same subject holds a doctorate from Imperial College as well as an MS from the California Institute of Technology. He began his MSc while semi-retired to "keep Alzheimer's at bay" but also admitted "I guess we like studying".

Jo says she clearly remembers Ian encouraging her and supporting her studies through childhood: "I always remember, before I went to high school, that my dad and I had these study sessions where he cut out these different molecules and then we'd attach them together with paper clips. And he was always buying me things like magnet sets, so he definitely

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encouraged me from a young age." She says once he bought her a book on Java programming!

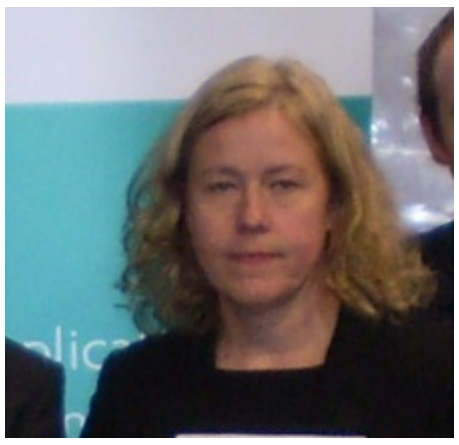
For Jo, her dad is an inspiration: "He's had a lifelong love of learning that he's been willing to pass on. He taught himself coding and computer programming and it's that curiosity that has guided him his whole life." She added: "I think a lot of people think you just learn when you're a child; a teenager and then you when you go to university and then that's it!"

The Open University (OU) is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in flexible distance learning. Since it began in 1969, the OU has taught more than 2.3 million students worldwide and currently has over 208,000 students.Seventy-one per cent of directly registered students are in full-time or part-time employment, and 76 FTSE 100 companies have sponsored staff to take OU courses.

Philippa Green reporting.

County CEO's pay rise triggering strikes?

8 July 2023



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

Surrey's "Tugs in Space!"

8 July 2023

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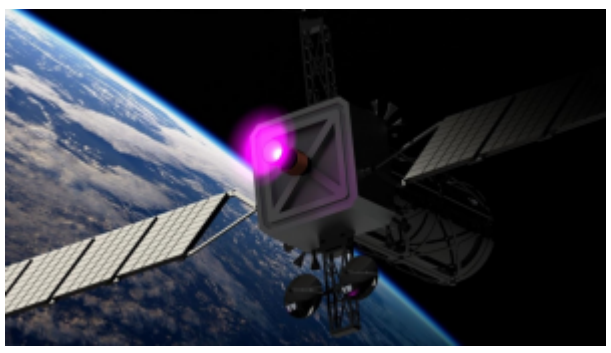

Thanks to £250,000 of government funding announced today, a new type of electric space propulsion system will be developed by the **University of Surrey** in partnership with the University of Leicester. The new thruster would be used to service and reposition satellites in space via agile space tugs.

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

The knives are out in Woking

8 July 2023



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:

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

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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."

Residents' complaints about anti-protester measures ahead of Derby

8 July 2023



Epsom Derby organisers faced an "awful lot of complaints" from residents as they put up fencing and closed footpaths to minimise disruption caused by Animal Rising protesters. The activists had made clear before the event they planned to disrupt this year's Derby, and one did make it to the track.

The Jockey Club, which owns **Epsom racecourse** among others, applied for an injunction ahead of the event on Saturday, June 3.

It also asked a special meeting of the **Epsom and Walton Downs Conservators**, held behind closed doors just days before the event, for permission to put up 4,000 metres of fencing across the Downs and suspend footpaths.

Simon Durrant, representing the Jockey Club at a meeting of the Conservators held on Monday (June 19), spoke of his "disappointment" at the fencing having to go up and that organisers were "constantly fearing the worst". But he said due to the "unique" nature of the Epsom Downs, organisers quickly realised "it wasn't about avoidance it was about how we were going to react to it".

Mr Durrant set out the challenges ahead of this year's event and addressed "frustrations" residents may have had. Adding that he knew there would be councillors at the meeting who had heard from residents about their "frustrations and disappointment" he called it a "different and difficult" event this year.

He said: "It was made even more difficult because, for obvious reasons, we didn't want to communicate why we were putting fencing up, why we were suspending the footpaths. We didn't want to give the protesters too much information before that Saturday morning. We've had comments in from residents as well."

He told the meeting that the Jockey Club had seen what the protesters were capable of when they disrupted the Grand National at Aintree in April. He said there were three types of protesters, the "really pleasant" peaceful protesters outside the grounds, those "intent on causing a scene in and around the racecourse" and then those who were trying to gain access to the racetrack.

Councillor **Bernice Froud** (Residents' Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale) thanked Mr Durrant for the explanation of the security issues. She said: "I did have an awful lot of complaints where I think people just didn't quite understand what was happening. I fully understand that none of us in this room that knew about it could really publicise that. So I think it's really helpful that you've actually explained in detail what the reasoning was, and I hope that goes some way to actually reassuring the residents."

At the meeting it was also confirmed that no working royals attended the Derby, and that as the late Queen Elizabeth II used to attend in a private capacity, it was not something that was "naturally be passed along" through the family.

Mr Durrant pointed to other complications across the weekend, including train strikes, and the FA Cup final between Manchester United and Manchester City that was played at Wembley on the same day.

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He told the meeting: “Two Manchester clubs, playing in London. It was great for the Manchester United fans because most of them live in London.”

With an event that he said gets “better and better every year”, Mr Durrant said of the Derby weekend: “As ever, in general, a fantastic, iconic event that puts Epsom on the map again.”

Image: Preparations for the Queen\’s Jubilee celebrations underway on the Hill seen from the Epsom Downs Racecourse. Credit: LDR Emily Coady-Stemp

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Should have gone to the Surrey Youth Games?

8 July 2023



On Saturday, children in **Epsom & Ewell** who took part in the 2023 **Specsavers** Surrey Youth Games and their families came together to celebrate the Games at the Surrey Sports Park in Guildford. Around 70 children from Epsom & Ewell aged 7–16 took part in the Games this year, having a go at a fun across a range of activities – from boccia, boxing and street basketball to judo and rugby, all at no charge.

The Specsavers Surrey Youth Games is the biggest multi-sport youth programme of its kind in the south east. The Games were open to all but were actively promoted to encourage those who might not normally get the chance to join a sports club or are otherwise inactive.

The Games would not have been possible without the 12 young ambassadors who helped promote them in their schools, encouraging young people to find out more and sign up to take part.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee said “We were overjoyed to see so many children from Epsom & Ewell take part in the Specsavers Surrey Youth Games this year.

“We know that building positive habits in early life is vital for the long-term health of our children and the Games are a great way for children who may not previously have had access to some of these sports to join in and have fun taking part.

I was honoured to meet the young ambassadors who volunteered their time to help promote the Games to their peers earlier in the year while I was serving as Mayor of Epsom & Ewell and was delighted to see the positive outcome of their efforts this weekend.”

The Specsavers Surrey Youth Games were coordinated by Active Surrey and sponsored by Specsavers.

Anonymity justified by acquittal?

8 July 2023



A service Surrey Police officer who allegedly ‘harassed two female colleagues’ has been cleared of misconduct. The hearing’s chairperson said they had looked into allegations that a police constable carried out a series of acts of harassment against two female officers but misconduct thresholds had not been proven, or were not reached.

The police officer, who has not been named and is referred to as “PC X”, escaped sanctions after the five day hearing which took place last week at the force’s Guildford HQ.

[Image is illustration only – it is not the officer in question.]

PC X was accused of “shouting” at an officer during the first coronavirus lockdown, and attempted to hug another officer twice despite being warned about his behaviour.

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Summing up, chairperson Eileen Herlihy said that on July 3, 2020, PC X got involved in a work-place argument that continued at the female officer's desk. Describing the altercation, which was said to have lasted a matter of seconds, the chairperson said: "He shouted at her" and approached " her in an intimidating manner" and that his actions were said to cause "intimidation and embarrassment" over a matter of "police policy".

The argument was said to have started before she was at her desk but that the tone was "abrupt" and "brusque". He then "placed himself close to her face" and "she had to put her hands up to create some space". After the argument the pair continued their day as normal. The woman's initial reaction was that it "was not a big deal but felt embarrassed".

The chairperson said that it was "not the officers intention to intimidate" and that there was no evidence the PC made any reference to her gender or sex. It was a "genuine disagreement between colleagues that led to an argument".

The other two matters related to attempts to hug the same woman. The first incident was said to have occurred on January 13, 2020. The panel heard two conflicting reports about the exact details surrounding the PC asking a female colleague for a hug outside their office. The dispute was over the timings of when he went in to hug her, and that he didn't stop when she pulled away.

The female PC said she regarded him as having a "reputation" as being "over friendly", "creepy and uncomfortable". Two months later when she was alone inside the office he again asked her for a hug. He put out his arms and she said no before walking away. He had already been warned about his behaviour.

The panel found he had failed to treat her with respect and courtesy but the chairperson said there was no motive of sexual gratification.

The panel found two of the allegations unproven; the argument and outdoor hug. The third, in the office, was proven but "but fell short of the threshold required for formal disciplinary action".

Surrey Police Headquarters in Mount Browne, near Guildford, hosted the police misconduct procedure between Monday, June 12, and Friday, June 16.

The male PC can not be named after his identity was protected by the committee chairperson to protect his welfare.

The hearing was brought by the Professional Standards Department as it felt there were cases to answer over potential breaches of authority, respect and courtesy, equality and diversity.

A spokesperson for Surrey Police said "thresholds for referral to disciplinary proceedings are necessarily set lower than that necessary to prove the misconduct, to ensure transparency in the police disciplinary regime."

During the course of the hearing, an application to withdraw certain allegations against the PC were also agreed.

Related report:

Anonymity for Surrey policeman

Ex MPC, now Epsom PPC, tackles Surrey PCs

8 July 2023



Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrat prospective parliamentary candidate and former Royal Military Police officer, **Helen Maguire**, is pushing Government to spend more on policing in Surrey given the "dire" state of policing in the County.

Using figures culled from various public sources by the LibDems, Ms Maguire points to the 1,412 burglaries that went unattended in Surrey last year, as another example "…. of the Conservative Government suggesting it is tough on crime with the facts telling a different story".

Figures uncovered by her Party show that of the 2,768 burglaries reported in Surrey, the police only arrived at the scene in 1356 instances – accounting for just 48.99% of cases. The number of unsolved burglaries in Surrey also soared, with 2195 cases being closed without a suspect even identified. This is equivalent to 79.3% of all cases.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for a new "Burglary Response Guarantee," which would create a guarantee that all domestic burglaries are attended by the police and properly investigated.

This will require a return to proper community policing, the LibDems urge – where officers are visible, trusted, and have the time and resources needed to focus on solving crime. Yet since 2015, Ms Maguire claims, the Conservatives have taken over 4,000 Police Community Support Officers off the streets, while they look set to have broken their key promise of having recruited an extra 20,000 police officers by the end of March 2023.

"The number of PCSOs has fallen to just 69 by the end of March – down from 136 PCSOs just over a year ago in February 2022. It's worse in **Epsom and Ewell** where we should have 8 and now have half of that number. That's hardly a good track record for a (Tory) Party which makes out to be supportive of policing! Hardly surprising then that so many

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burglaries in our community are not being attended by police officers. No family should be denied justice after suffering the distress and trauma of being burgled", said Ms Maguire.

"Car theft is also a scourge across the county with a staggering 79.2% of car thefts going unsolved last year with just 5.3% resulting in a charge or summons. Lib Dem analysis, based on the latest Home Office statistics on crime outcomes, showed that a grand total of 1503 car theft cases in Surrey were closed in 2022 without a suspect even being identified – equivalent to 4 car thefts going unsolved every day.

"The priorities of this government are clearly not on our public services with our police officers, like the NHS, being starved of resources. In such a dire situation, enough is enough – we need a change of regime – one that puts the focus on our communities, on law and order, and the health and wealth of our people," said Helen Maguire.

"Many families across Surrey now feel unsafe in their own homes, because this Conservative government has left our police forces overstretched and under-resourced. It means far too many victims are being denied justice and far too many criminals are getting away with it.

"Meanwhile, it has been revealed that the Surrey Police budget for 2022/23 was underspent by at least £7.9 million, enough to pay for the entire 5.1% council tax increase imposed by the Police and Chief Commissioner Lisa Townsend for 2023/24."

Surrey Police responded to Ms Maguire's claims:

Exclusive to the **Epsom and Ewell Times** a spokesperson for Surrey Police rebuts the LibDem candidate's claims:

"We are committed to deploying officers to all home burglaries. We recognise how invasive and traumatic it can be to be a victim of burglary, and this is why we are already investing significant resources in preventing and tackling these offences, alongside providing the appropriate support and advice to victims.

Each of our three divisions in Surrey has its own proactive team that reviews all burglaries in that division. These teams monitor ongoing burglary trends and patterns, identify hot spot areas and target prolific and repeat offenders and organised crime networks to ensure that patrols are directed in a targeted and most effective way.

Changes to how burglaries are classified, which were introduced on 1 April 2023, will enable officers to give a greater focus on home burglaries and help to meet the NPCC pledge of attending all home burglaries.

Burglary offences had previously been divided into two categories of "residential" and "business and community". A residential burglary previously included sheds, garages, outhouses and summer houses, as well as the dwelling itself.

The changes will mean that residential burglaries are split into two categories – residential burglary of a home and residential burglary of an unconnected building. All sheds, outhouses and garages with no connecting door to the home will be classed as unconnected buildings.

Our figures show that we have solved 81 more offences than the previous 12 months and so far have had 125 less offences (106 less offences between April 2023 and today v April 2022 and June 14/06/22).

Work also remains ongoing to prevent burglaries from occurring in the first place by ensuring effective prevention measures are in place. Many of the residential burglaries reported are shed or garage break-ins and we continue to run awareness-raising campaigns in our local communities to remind homeowners of the steps they can take to avoid becoming a victim.

More advice on protecting your home/outbuildings from burglary can be found on our web site https://www.surrey.police.uk/cp/crime-prevention/protect-home-crime/

In some cases, there may not be enough intelligence or positive lines of enquiry for police to act on. This does not mean that a crime is closed indefinitely or that intelligence or information is ignored. This information will be collated and monitored to identify emerging crime hotspots and any trends or patterns.

If an investigation is closed, and we then receive information to link an offender at a later date we will always pursue this to seek closure for victims.

The public can also help in the pursuit of offenders by reporting suspicious activity, and also by reporting to the police those selling stolen property or those involved in burglary offences via 101, by webchat on our website https://surrey.police.uk/online and https://www.surrey.police.uk/tua/tell-us-about/cor/tell-us-about-existing-case-report/ or anonymously via the independent charity Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

Residents are also able to upload video footage and images that they think could assist our burglary investigations through the use of a public CCTV submission portal https://surrey.police.uk/suspiciousactivityportal "

And on the claims about reductions in PCSOs the police spokesperson continued:

"In 2022, to contribute to savings across the force, we reduced the number of Police Community Support Officers in Surrey Police to 96, 22 posts fewer than our previous staffing level of 118 full-time equivalent PCSOs. This reduction did not involve redundancies and achieving this staffing level did not result in a reduction in overall numbers in our Safer Neighbourhood Teams; we maintain a strong blended mix of police officers and PCSOs in these key frontline posts in every borough.

In September 2022, Surrey Police employed 88 PCSOs. This is lower than our desired number of PCSOs, so it is inaccurate to say that 35 PCSO roles have been cut by the Force. We are actively recruiting to bring our establishment level back up to 96.

We know how important a visible police team with local knowledge is to residents in each of our boroughs. A trusted, knowledgeable, and proactive local policing presence is just as important to us, and PCSOs are a valued and integral part of that."

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Adding to the local force's rebuttal Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey **Lisa Townsend** said: "The suggestion that policing in the county is in a 'dire' state is once again entirely misleading – the reality is that Surrey Police is now the biggest it has ever been.

"The Force has not only met but exceeded its target for extra officers under the government's programme to increase numbers by 20,000 across the country. An extra 395 police officers have been added to the ranks since 2019 – this is 136 more than the target set by government for Surrey which is fantastic news for residents.

"Last year, in order to help achieve its savings target – Surrey Police made an operational decision to temporarily halt the recruitment of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs). "These posts were replaced with new warranted officers and there were no redundancies or loss of numbers to Surrey Police's frontline teams.

"PCSOs continue to play a crucial role in policing our communities – recruitment has been reopened and the Force are seeking applications right now. We expect their numbers to back to the previous levels within three years.

"Over the last year, Surrey Police have achieved an increase in the number of residential burglaries solved and have since coupled this with a commitment to attend all reported house burglaries in Surrey. The outcome rate for residential burglary in Surrey remains above the national average.

"I'm proud that Surrey is the safest county in the south east, and the fourth safest county in the country."

What is your experience of policing in Epsom and Ewell? Write to us at Epsom and Ewell Times. Via the contact page or by email to admin@epsomandewelltimes.com

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