EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

26th November 2026

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Aiming high in local government reporting

28 May 2023



Epsom and Ewell Times is proud to have been a part in the fulfilment of one of our volunteer citizen journalist's ambition to work as a reporter. **Ellie Ames**, who has reported on Council and planning matters for the Epsom and Ewell Times over the last year, has recently secured a position with **LocalGov**, the UK's largest dedicated local government news website.

Ellie graduated from Durham University with 1st class honours in English literature followed by a masters in literary linguistics from Nottingham.

We congratulate Ellie on her appointment and wish her a successful career.

The Epsom and Ewell Times has given opportunities to students of journalism to write for us. Ellie Ames' experience establishes how being published by our news service can boost a budding writer's career prospects.

If you wish to write for Epsom and Ewell Times do please get in touch.

Picture the opening.....

28 May 2023



The 4th **Satisfied Eye International Film Festival** (26th to 28th May) has opened its doors in **Bourne Hall** Ewell.

There was a sense of anticipation in the air as people gathered to celebrate and enjoy the best of what cinema has to offer, and there was a feeling of camaraderie among the festival-goers.

One of the visitors who were at previous festivals shared with us that he returned as he wanted to see more different films, styles and types. The festival started with the people's choice selection. Two films from France, "A Travers", a very touching story about a couple who needs to terminate the pregnancy in the seventh month and "The Censor or Dreams". "An Irish Goodbye", this year's Oscar winner, tells us a story about two brothers who reunite after their mother's death and another Oscar nominee, White Eye, from Israel, where a man finds his stolen bike and struggles to remain human.

"The buzz has been very special, we haven't seen it before and long may it last", shared with us **Chris Hastings**, the founder of SEIFF.

Among great films, you can enjoy sitting on a Game of Thrones Throne, letting Johnny5 Replica chase you around The Flying Sauce Cafe.

Please check the schedule below; there are a lot of Oscar-nominated films on Saturday and Sunday to be seen.

Find out more about the tickets here:

https://www.tickettailor.com/events/satisfiedeyeinternationalfilmfestival

Reporter – **Romana Sustar** is a multilingual freelance journalist, University Language Tutor, accomplished marketer and owner of Epsom Digital Ltd., a local digital marketing agency.

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/romanasustar/

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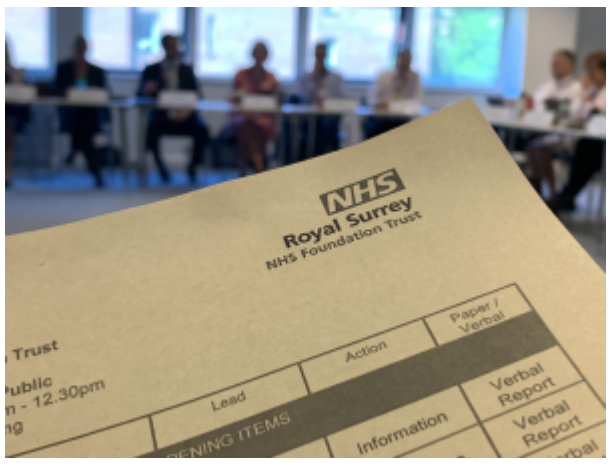
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Junior doctor strikes to be ‘monthly’ in Surrey?

28 May 2023



Junior doctor strikes at a Surrey NHS trust is feared to become ‘monthly’ with ‘a lot less willingness’ from people to cover gaps in maintaining levels of service.

The Royal Surrey NHS foundation board meeting took place on Thursday, May 25, and almost immediately the issue of striking doctors came to the fore with staff retention and breaches of patient confidentiality also featuring prominently.

Front and centre though was the dispute over pay and conditions between the Government and junior doctors. Royal Surrey CEO Louise Stead said, with three days of industrial action already announced for June, the trust “would be going into overdrive to plan for that” but said it would be more difficult as there would be “a lot less willingness” from people to cover any gaps – a problem that would only increase “as this goes on”.

She told the meeting it was increasingly likely that there would be “strikes every month until there is a resolution”, adding “this will be very difficult”. Trust chairperson Joss Bigmore said the “whole situation was becoming “increasingly frustrating on the hard working people”. He told the meeting: “Until they find a resolution to this its just going to get worse and worse.

He said: “It was galling to see the health secretary canvassing during the election when the junior doctors were on strike”, before adding “We have managed incredibly well so far but it won’t last. We really need to find a resolution to this.”

Junior doctors in England are planning a new 72-hour walkout in June as talks with the government once again broke down. The walkout will start at 7am on Wednesday, June 14, and run until Saturday, June 17 with the British Medical Union labelling the government’s 5 per cent pay offer as not “credible”.

Among the other items discussed during the morning meeting were the increase in the number of healthcare infections being detected across the hospital, in line with the rest of the UK since coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Jacqui Tingle, the director of nursing and midwifery, said that while there had been a nationwide pattern for infectious diseases to rise as a whole, Royal Surrey had specific recorded a “spike” in c-difficile cases.

The meeting also heard about the on-going issues with recruitment, which had played a role in the three month increase in complaints received from patients.

On IT, she spoke to the “significant rise” in patient data breaches – 248 from 90 reported last year, which she said was due to the implementation of a new electronic patient record system though these are said to be in decline,

What has been happening, she said, was the new system pulled patient data from a central hub rather than the most up-to-date local lists resulting, in some cases, in confidential medical letters being sent to the wrong address.

Related reports:

Surrey doctors to go on strike?

Image: Royal Surrey Hospital Trust Board (Chris Caulfield)

Derby stalwart sent over the Hill?

28 May 2023



Baronet **Sir Rupert Mackeson,** a former soldier, London banker and a passionate horse racing author, who loves Epsom,

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talked to the Epsom and Ewell Times's **Romana Sustar**.

"I joined the Army just before my nineteenth birthday in 1960 and spent four years in the Buffs. On leaving university, I converted my TA commission into a regular one and transferred to the Royal Horse Guards. In the autumn of 1966, I was posted to the Mounted Squadron stationed in London. Alas, soon afterwards, when on duty riding a black horse, I had an accident and broke my back. As a result, I now have great mobility problems and have to use a Zimmer frame." says Mackeson.

However, his passion for horse riding didn't stop after the accident; he found a way to stay in touch with the sport as an author and trader. Since early 1983 he has been involved with sporting books, paintings and prints.

Despite the accident, he had the great honour of escorting Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on several state occasions, including her Birthday Parade and the State Opening of Parliament, often as Escort Commander – the senior mounted officer from the mounted regiment called "the Field Officer in Brigade Waiting".

"One may wonder how I carried out these duties, having broken my back. Luckily it was low down, and I had a corset with a metal back, which allowed me to carry out my mounted duties," explains Rupert.

In 1997 when three Jockey Club courses, Epsom, Sandown and Kempton, wanted more trade stands, he answered the call and traded on all three, averaging 50-60 days a year. Traders in those days got the security of tenure (protected tenant status) after a year or two, as they often had to start in poor positions and get better ones as other traders retired or died. That's how racecourses, county shows and equitation events like Badminton filled their inferior trade positions.

"Usually, everything regarding trade stands was done verbally on Jockey Club racecourses. Still, as Sandown wanted us there as often as possible, they sent out contracts to emphasise the rent reductions advantage of coming frequently," explains Rupert.

However, times have changed for traders with our lives embracing the digital age, and the effect of the financial crisis didn't leave anything untouched. **The Jockey Club** leadership transformed the layout, and the infrastructure changed.

Rupert Mackeson believed he was a protected tenant under the verbal agreement from 1997. In February 2023, he received an email from the Jockey Club saying that he could not trade in his usual position as they had other plans for Area 3, so they offered him a stand on The Hill.

However, for an older disabled person, who needs a Zimmer frame to walk, the new location on The Hill would present a challenge. The bitter feeling of not getting his permanent location at the Jockey Club made him feel unwelcome, disappointed and left behind.

The Jockey Club spokesman explained that despite trying to find an alternative solution, the previous locations are no longer available because of planned improvements.

The Jockey Club has been around for nearly 300 years, no doubt facing many difficult decisions as the world changes around them. They are not alone in this challenge.

After speaking with Rupert, I wonder if we forgot that some values from the past are valuable. He is a reminder that the sands of time only run in one direction and the importance of considering our older selves when taking difficult decisions to move our companies forward.

Rupert Mackeson books:

- *Great Racing Gambles and Frauds*
- *Flat Racing Scams and Scandals* (Metro Publishing, 2004) ISBN 978-1-84358-042-3
- *Bet Like a Man* (Eye Ltd, Bridgnorth, 2001) ISBN 1-903070-13-9

Tickets for this year's Epsom Derby festival Friday 2nd and Saturday 3rd June are available on The Jockey Club website

About Romy:

Romana Sustar is a multilingual freelance journalist, University Language Tutor, accomplished marketer and owner of Epsom Digital Ltd., a local digital marketing agency.

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/romanasustar/

Post script:

This year he will not be at Epsom. He is, however, having a major exhibition of Piggott, Oaks and Derby memorabilia, including unique materials from Friday 16th of June till Tuesday the 27th excluding Sundays, 10am to 4 pm -at Weston Super Frames, 17 Locking Road, Weston Super Mare BS23 3BY

Woking Council has the worst debt in Britain!

28 May 2023

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Woking Borough Council has crumbled under the sheer weight of its crippling £2billion debt as Government appointed commissioners have been sent in.

The borough council had amassed the billions in debt as part of a failing investment strategy that has spiralled out of control leading to the situation it is in now – its annual interest repayments are more than it brings in from council tax.

Today, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLHUC) has sent in three commissioners over the "serious concerns that have been raised regarding the exceptional level of financial and commercial risk" the authority exposed itself to, "as well as its approach to strategic financial decision making and debt management".

The council might also switch to full all-out elections every four years as that "can facilitate stable, strategic local leadership, delivering a clear programme for which it can be held to account by the electorate, and having the time to tackle some of the longer-term issues its communities might face".

"The absence of such elections is often a consistent feature of under-performing councils and a common thread through many council interventions", letters from DLUHC to the council read.

In a letter to the borough's chief executive, DLUHC also criticised its "failure" to provide assurance "on the adequacy of the actions that it is taking to address the issues or provide assurance of its capacity to take the necessary action, considering the scale and pace of the response required."

A Government report titled 'Woking Borough Council: External assurances review' published today (May 25) said: "In conclusion, as a result of past investment decisions, the Council has failed its best value duty leaving an unprecedented legacy for the current Leadership Team, which they have not been able to address to prevent financial failure. It is evident that the Council does not have the capacity and expertise to address the scale and complexity of these issues, and so it will continue to fail its best value duty.

"Resolving the issues and moving the Council back to a place of financial stability and value-for-money for the taxpayer will require significant support, including statutory oversight. There is a need for commercial and financial support including capital, legal and forensic accounting specialists. The Council will also need additional leadership capacity to help deliver this swiftly…….

"There are critical decisions that need to be taken in the next 2-3 months, for which immediate expert support is required."

Within six months, the council must now prepare and agree a credibly resourced "Improvement and Recovery Plan" to the satisfaction of appointed commissioners.

The plan should set out "measures to be undertaken, together with milestones and delivery targets against which to measure performance, in order to deliver rapid and sustainable improvements in governance, finance and commercial functions".

DLUHC said it had been closely monitoring the concerns around Woking Borough Council's commercial activity and financial situation.

Relative to its size, Woking is "the most indebted local authority" in the UK according to DLUHC.

DLUHC documents show that, as of December 2022, it had £1.9bn in borrowing compared to a core spending power of £14m.

It has two main companies, ThamesWey Group and Victoria Square Woking Ltd, that generated the majority of its debt – through associated housing and regeneration schemes.

In January 2023, DLUHC commissioned an External Assurance Review, covering governance, finance and commercial issues, stating that it was "in the territory" of issuing a section 114 notice as part of setting its 2023/24 budget.

In a letter to Julie Fisher, chief executive of Woking Borough Council, Suzanne Clarke, deputy director at the Local Government Finance Stewardship, said: "After careful consideration of the evidence provided by the reviewers and officials, the Secretary of State considers that there is a pressing case for urgent government action to protect the interests of the residents and taxpayers of Woking, as well as national taxpayers.

"The financial challenge is acute, and the Secretary of State is concerned that key decisions need to be taken in the coming weeks and months to secure Woking's financial position, as well as provide assurance that your authority is taking all steps necessary to comply with its best value duty."

Councillor **Ann-Marie Barker**, Leader of Woking Borough Council, said: "I am committed to openness and transparency and will continue to keep residents up to date on progress as we deal with the council's finances. I welcome the letter I have received today from the Minister and the recommendations being proposed by the team that undertook this review.

"I am pleased that there is acknowledgement of the strong collaboration between officers of the council and the review team on the progress that has been made to address the council's financial resilience. My administration is very clear

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about the huge challenges facing the council due to the legacy of both the extraordinarily high and disproportionate levels of debt that we have inherited from the previous administration. We are also very clear and focused on the significant risks that the council is now facing up to as a result of that debt.

“We also recognise that these challenges are so significant that the council and its officers cannot deal with these on its own. We therefore fully acknowledge and accept the findings of the report and welcome the support set out by the Minister in his letter.

“I know that councillors and officers will work at pace alongside the government-appointed commissioners to address the issues identified in the report and achieve best value for the public purse through the preparation and delivery of an action plan.

“When my administration gained control of the council last May, I pledged to take on the challenge of major change and embed affordable, responsible and sustainable principles into how the council conducts its future business and this remains my priority. As part of this pledge, we have taken steps to control borrowing, made changes to the governance of our commercial investments and I have instigated independent reviews of all the council’s borrowing and investments.

“I recognise we need to deliver our plans for recovery of the council’s finances with greater pace and urgency and we face difficult decisions in the months ahead. I will work with my officers to ensure, with the support of the commissioning team, we have the capacity and experience to deliver the improvements needed.

“I remain committed to keeping residents, businesses, and community partners fully informed as we progress through this process and develop the detailed plans for recovery with support and oversight from the commissioning team.”

Related reports:

Woking £490m write down sparks ‘worst fears’

Waking to Woking’s woeful debt

Would you want to live in Woking?

Woking up to a very big debt problem

Epsom and Ewell’s 7th Labour Mayor?

28 May 2023



Labour Councillor **Rob Geleit** for Court Ward has been officially recognised as the new Mayor of Epsom and Ewell at the council’s annual Mayor Making ceremony at the Town Hall on Tuesday 23 May.

The Mayor is the first citizen of the Borough of Epsom & Ewell and has several specific roles during their one-year term of office. These include representing the council and the local community at formal and ceremonial occasions, both within the borough and elsewhere, and chairing full meetings of the Council.

Image provided by EEBC with no headroom for front page.

[The Epsom and Ewell Times adds to this Council press release: The founding Mayor of Epsom was Chuter Ede who later became Home Secretary in the post-war Labour Government. Despite the dominance of the Residents Association in the Council the ruling group have not been ungenerous in voting in opposition Councillors to the top ceremonial post. Labour’s Laura Woodcock, Bill Carpenter, Joyce Storer, Alan Carlson and Sheila Berry all taking a turn and the Liberal Democrat’s Colin Taylor.]

During the mayoral year the Mayor is strictly politically neutral. As Mayor for 2023/2024, Rob will have a full diary of civic events planned throughout the year, including visits to residents, community and sports groups.

On becoming Mayor, Rob said, “It is a great privilege to be appointed Mayor of Epsom and Ewell. It is a wonderful opportunity to give back to and highlight the community I love and the place I’ve called home for many years.

“I look forward to meeting as many residents and organisations as possible throughout my tenure as Mayor and showcase their work in our community.”

Rob first moved to Epsom in 1977 when he was 5 years old and has lived here, on and off, since then. He attended Pound

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Lane School, Bishopsmead Church of England School and finally Epsom High School, where he was Head Boy.

After he left school, Rob suffered an episode of mental ill health, a challenging time for him. He recovered well and was first elected as a Labour Councillor in Court Ward in 2011.

Rob has served on several committees during his time as a Councillor at Epsom & Ewell, most recently serving as Deputy Mayor.

In his professional life, Rob works as a computer programmer in Leatherhead. During his career, he has written code for the European Space Agency, as well as working on Smart Metering and at the Crown Prosecution Service.

Rob is passionate about the environment. He has had a zero-carbon footprint for over seven years. He doesn't own a car, instead choosing to cycle and use public transport. At home, he uses sustainably sourced electricity and offsets his gas usage.

During his Mayoral year, Rob will raise awareness of and funds for three charities. These are:
Age Concern Epsom & Ewell
A local community charity focusing on empowering older people in the Borough of Epsom & Ewell by providing information, advice, medical transport, social support and befriending services.
Citizen Advice Epsom & Ewell
A free advice service to people that live, work or study within the Epsom and Ewell area.
Love Me, Love My Mind
A small registered charity based in Epsom, which aims to promote better understanding of mental health and to support the wellbeing of everyone in the community.

Surrey takes European lead on Hong Kong

28 May 2023



Europe's first research hub dedicated to Hong Kong Studies will be launched at the University of Surrey on Thursday 25 May 2023. Surrey's Hong Kong Studies Hub will look to shape policy debates and the wider question of the role of Hong Kong communities in International Relations.

The hub will also host the Hong Kong Studies Association Secretariat and a new Hong Kong Studies Library.

The hub's upcoming launch will bring together a prestigious expert panel of academics and practitioners, led by Dr Malte Kaeding from the University of Surrey, to investigate the latest research and policy developments, followed by a keynote conversation on Hong Kong's current role in international relations, and the work and impact of local Hong Kong communities.

The launch event is free to attend and will take place from 5pm to 8pm in the Wates House Green Room, on the University of Surrey's Stag Hill campus, with an opportunity to network from 8pm onwards.

Dr Malte Kaeding, Senior Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Surrey, and the Director of the new Hub, said:

"The launch of the Hong Kong Studies Hub at the University of Surrey is a milestone for Hong Kong Studies in Europe.

"Surrey is a leading academic hub for Hong Kong Studies, having hosted two Hong Kong Studies Association conferences in 2021 and 2022. With over 15-years of my own research on Hong Kong politics, supported by a REF Impact Case, and my role as co-founder of the Hong Kong Studies Association, I believe Surrey is at the forefront of this field.

"The hub's multidisciplinary perspective and its focus on methodological innovation, combined with a strong emphasis on engagement with the fast-growing Hong Konger community, positions the University at the cutting-edge of this important and exciting development."

Professor Amelia Hadfield, Head of Department and Dean International at the University of Surrey, contributed her own views, saying:

"The Department of Politics is a perfect location in which to situate the new Hong Kong Studies Hub. We are proud of our track record on interdisciplinary approaches and providing cross-scholarly support, and the hub will help us engage authentically in this highly relevant area."

Surrey University Press Office.

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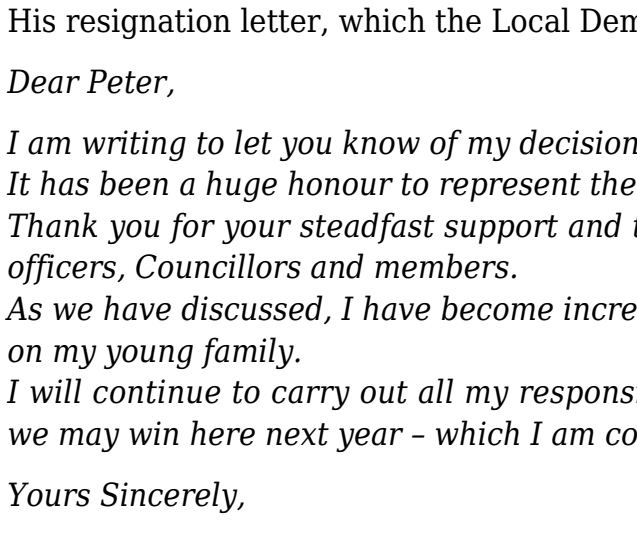
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Esher & Walton up for GRaabs

28 May 2023



Dominic Raab, former Deputy Prime Minister and Conservative MP for Esher and Walton, will step down at the next general election due to the “increasing concerns over the last few years about the pressure the job has placed” on his young family.

His decision was confirmed in a letter sent on Friday, May 19, to the local party’s group chairperson Peter Szanto. The announcement comes a month after he stood down as Deputy PM after the results of a bullying investigation into his conduct were handed to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Mr Raab was first elected in May 2010 with an 18,593 majority, although this was cut to just 2,743 in the May 2019 election.

As MP, he served as Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor, and Secretary of State for Justice.
He was also the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union from July to November 2018. He is married with two children.

His resignation letter, which the Local Democracy Service has seen, read:

Dear Peter,

I am writing to let you know of my decision to step down at the next General Election.
It has been a huge honour to represent the Conservatives, since 2010, in this wonderful constituency.
Thank you for your steadfast support and tireless efforts, alongside all the teamwork and hard graft put in by our superb officers, Councillors and members.
As we have discussed, I have become increasingly concerned over the last few years about the pressure the job has placed on my young family.
I will continue to carry out all my responsibilities to my constituents, and provide every support in campaigning, so that we may win here next year – which I am confident we can do under this Prime Minister’s leadership.

Yours Sincerely,
Dominic Raab.

In April this year, Mr Raab quit as Deputy Prime Minister after a report looking into bullying allegations was delivered to Downing Street.

The Esher and Walton MP announced his resignation via a statement and said he would keep his word if any findings of bullying were found.

The inquiry, conducted by lawyer Adam Tolley KC, upheld two of the allegations against Mr Raab.
His decision now to not stand as an MP was greeted with “deep regret” by the group chair who said Mr Raab had “the full support of the Association to continue as our candidate”.

Mr Szanto said that “on a personal level” he knew of the sacrifices Mr Raab and his family had made but that his commitment to the residents of Esher and Walton had “always been outstanding”.

The Esher and Walton Conservative Association has since been in touch with Conservative campaign headquarters about the selection of a new parliamentary candidate although at this stage no timetable has been given.

Future of the Planet in Surrey hands?

28 May 2023

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A Cumbrian coal mining firm is intervening in a landmark legal hearing to determine whether oil drilling should be allowed in **Surrey**. **The Horse Hill** drilling case is set for the **Supreme Court** in June with protesters hoping for a ruling that could severely restrict fossil fuel exploration in the UK.

West Cumbria Mining Ltd, the company behind Britain's first new prospective coal mine for decades has been given permission to intervene in the case over plans for oil drilling at Horse Hill, Surrey according to a Supreme Court order published earlier this month.

In law, an intervention is when a non-party joins ongoing litigation, as the case may affect their rights and they should have the right to be heard. The other intervening parties are Friends of the Earth, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) and Greenpeace.

The case is being brought by Redhill resident **Sarah Finch** on behalf of the **Weald Action Group**, which represents communities opposing onshore oil and gas projects.

Ms Finch is challenging **Surrey County Council**'s 2019 decision to grant **UK Oil and Gas** (UKOG) planning permission for drilling – on the grounds that environmental impact assessments must take into account downstream emissions caused by burning extracted oil.



Horse Hill protest outside Surrey County Hall when planning application was being considered in September 2019. Credit Rebecca Curley.

Her fight has now reached the country's highest court after three judges were split over the lawfulness of the county council's decision to grant permission for 25 years of oil drilling and production – in the same year the county declared a climate emergency.

Carbon emissions from burning the extracted fossil fuels were not included in either the Horse Hill or Cumbrian coal mine's environmental impact assessments.

Ms Finch said: "The fact that **West Cumbria Mining** wants to have its say in a case about a small onshore oil development 370 miles from their proposed coal mine shows the national importance of this case. I hope that the **Supreme Court** will confirm that no fossil fuel development – coal, oil or gas – should be allowed without consideration of its full climate impact."

According to UKOG the Horse Hill site in **Reigate and Banstead** has so far produced about 185,000 barrels of oil. Approximately 1.362 million remain.

Friends of the Earth campaigner, **Tony Bosworth**, said: "The biggest climate impact from gas, coal and oil projects occurs when the fuel they produce is eventually burned – it's unbelievable that this is effectively ignored when planning decisions are made. This landmark legal challenge could have huge implications for fossil fuel developments across the country, including the new coal mine in West Cumbria. West Cumbria Mining are clearly concerned, which is why they have intervened.

"West Cumbria Mining boast that they will build the world's first zero carbon mine, which is a complete contradiction in terms. Their calculations also ignore emissions from when the coal produced is actually used – that's like saying that we should ignore the health impacts of smoking cigarettes and just look at how they are produced.

"We need to stop burying our heads in the sand. Sarah Finch's legal case could play a huge role in building a net zero

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future.”

OEP general counsel, **Peter Ashford**, said: “Environmental impact assessment is so important for integrating the environment into planning decision-making. We are interested in this case because of the opportunity to clarify the law here to ensure proper decision-making that enhances environmental protection. We hope that the Supreme Court will take this opportunity, and will develop principles for determining the proper approach to the assessment of indirect effects under the EIA legislation.”

The hearing is scheduled for **June 21**.

The coal firm is now battling on two legal fronts after a judge ruled on Friday May 19 to grant Friends of the Earth and South Lakes Action on Climate Change a hearing to challenge the UK Government’s decision to approve West Cumbria Mining’s deep coal plans.

That hearing is expected to last for three days when it is heard later this year.

A spokesperson for West Cumbria Mining Limited said it would be inappropriate to comment on a live legal case. UKOG have been approached for comment.

Related Reports:

A Surrey Borough funds legal fight to stop oil drilling

The Hills Are Alive With the Sound of Drilling… ?

Surrey MPs oppose each other on drills in the hills

Oiling the wheels of justice on Surrey Hills

Image credits: NASA’s Earth Observatory and Rainer Lesniewski Getty Images

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Woking £490m write down sparks ‘worst fears’

28 May 2023



Epsom and Ewell Times has been following a nearby Surrey Borough’s debt woes. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, in contrast to Woking, has consistently balanced its budgets. The Woking towers in question are visible from Epsom Downs. Chris Caulfield reports.

“Worst fears” have been confirmed in newly published accounts that exposed a half billion pound “black hole” in Woking Borough Council’s finances and plunged the future of many services into doubt.

The figures, released this week on Companies House for 2021, show the council’s biggest investment, Victoria Square, has had £490,479,300 wiped off its value.

Construction on the development began in 2017 after the previous administration signed off on £750m of loans to cover the investment.

It was billed as one of “the most ambitious developments in the South East” and included 429 apartments, retail and leisure space, a performing arts academy, a four star hotel, and a medical centre. It means its fair market value is now hugely below its carrying book value but the scale of the figures, though predicted by councillors, still shocked.

Councillor **Adam Kirby** (Lib Dem, Horsell) told the LDRS: “We’ve been looking at this for a really long time. We’ve taken control of the council a year ago and can now get a better idea of the council’s financial position. This is our worst fears come true. We didn’t want to be right about this but in the last few days the Company’s House valuation has been eye catching. “We were told for many many years that these investments, if you could call them that, wouldn’t impact the budget for council services, but what is likely is it will.

“There are statutory functions we have to provide by law and we could be going into special measures to help us – we are in conversation with a government task force who are working with councillors and the CEO. We are trying to protect things people need. Meals on Wheels, the leisure centre, don’t have legal requirements to support them but we do not want to take them away. Stopping them won’t solve the problem.”

He added: “It would be irresponsible to speculate on what changes will be made at this stage, its people’s jobs and residents who rely on these services. People who were told these investments wouldn’t impact them.” He said there were

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two ways to look at the problem, cash flow or valuation, but that it was the same problem.

The council borrowed £750m for the project and, according to the latest valuation report, it is only worth £199m. Cllr Kirby added: “There is a black hole in the balance sheet.”

Furthermore the council’s total debt is expected to hit £2.5billion by 2024/25, up from its current level of £2.1bn. The council, he said, was firmly in “section 114 territory” where the government takes over the financial running of a local authority that is effectively bankrupt and unable to pay for even basic services.

Woking Borough Council is running on a budget deficit of about £10m on a budget of £45m. There is £11m collected in council tax with the rest coming from sources such as parking or rent rates.

The Companies House report on Victoria Square Woking Limited (VSWL) indicates the company incurred a net loss of £490,479,300 during the year ended December 31, 2021.

VSWL owns the new shopping centre, residential development, and hotel – backed by a longstanding agreement with Woking Council.

The report adds that its current liabilities exceeded its total assets by £501,988,671 indicating a “material uncertainty exists that may cast significant doubt on the company’s ability to continue as a going concern and, therefore, “that it may be unable to realise its assets and discharge its liabilities in the normal course of business”.

Cllr Kirby said: “We are going to find out the impact on the council soon and it’s not going to be good.”
The council has said the £490 million write down not only “confirms its worst fears” but casts “uncertainty on further funding for Victoria Square project beyond May with imminent reports into financial implications for the council itself.”

Cllr **Dale Roberts**, portfolio holder for finance and economic development at Woking Borough Council, said: “Even though we had fully anticipated massive losses and signalled them earlier in the year, this is still devastating news. He added: “As soon as we won last year’s elections, we took immediate action to limit the damage. First, we reduced the period for which we would commit working capital to VSWL from ten to five years. Then, we began to put in place the missing systems and processes to properly run a commercial operation – and to protect the long-term interests of all Woking residents.

“Now, these accounts will further inform ongoing work being carried out by public sector finance experts, who we commissioned earlier this year to better understand the sustainability of the council’s own annual budget. Looking ahead, it would be irresponsible to speculate on the details and timings of what happens next. However it is responsible to be transparent about the scale of this situation. Only complete transparency will enable our commitment to finding solutions as soon as possible.”

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Waking to Woking’s woeful debt

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Woking up to a very big debt problem

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It’s Walk to School Week in Surrey

28 May 2023



May is the month to talk about walking, more walking and even more walking. The weather is brighter, dryer and warmer and is the best time to get outdoors as a family.

We know how important walking to school is for children’s health and the environment. It reduces congestion, improves road safety at the school gates and instils lifelong healthy habits. It’s been proven that children who do some form of exercise, especially a walk before school, do better in class because they arrive refreshed, fit and ready to learn.

The school run alone is responsible for generating half a million tonnes of CO2 nationally per year

Not everyone is able to walk to school, but there might be part of the journey you could walk. This Walk to School Week (15 to 19 May), could you think about turning rides into strides which can really make a difference? Take a look on our active travel webpage for inspiration.

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Making it safe for Surrey's children

It's important for parents to know that their children are safe when walking along a road. This is where our Feet First: Walking Training comes in – a programme that provides school children aged 7 to 8 years old (Year 3) with the road safety skills to enable them to safely walk to and from school with their parents and carers, whilst also preparing children to travel independently in the future. The training is done in the classroom as well as using online resources, at home activities and taking children outside on Surrey's streets for them to practice what they've learned in a real-world environment. It includes teaching:

- The Green Cross Code and how to cross the road safely
- Road signs and pedestrian crossings
- Recognising safe and unsafe places to cross
- Dealing with distractions and rushing
- How to cross between parked cars
- Understanding vehicle lights and sounds
- Crossing driveways
- The benefits of active travel

Last term, our Feet First: Walking Training instructors taught 3,500 pupils across 65 schools the skills they need to stay safe on Surrey's roads. By the end of this academic year our instructors will have taught over 5,500 pupils at nearly 100 primary schools in the county.

For more information on the training visit the Walking training for schools webpage or speak to your school to see if they're signed up.

Epsom & Ewell's Coronation Champion

28 May 2023



Brownie leader **Mary Zoeller** from **Epsom** has been recognised for her outstanding volunteer work by Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla.

Led by **Queen Camilla**, the **Royal Voluntary Service** has recognised 500 outstanding volunteers from across the UK with a **Coronation Champion Award**. The awards celebrate and recognise the tireless work of volunteers around the country, which formed a key part of the coronation celebrations for His Majesty the King.

Mary received the award for her work volunteering with Girlguiding and other local charities. Over the past thirteen years she has inspired girls to have exceptional experiences as leader of **1st Ewell Village (St Mary's)**, as well as being Epsom division and assistant county commissioner for Surrey East.

The Coronation Champion Volunteer Awards were judged by a panel consisting of specialists in the volunteering field and charity leaders. Mary is one of only 500 people in the UK to be awarded a Coronation Champion Volunteer Award.

Mary attended the Coronation concert at Windsor Castle on Sunday 7 May in recognition of her award.

Mary said: *"I'm very shocked but absolutely delighted to be named a Coronation Champion. In Girlguiding, we all work hard to make a difference to girls and young women's lives and it's wonderful when our volunteering efforts are recognised. Attending the concert on Sunday was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, one which I will always remember."*

Brownie in 1st Ewell Village (St Mary's) Libby, aged 9, said: *"All the brownies are so excited and happy that Brown Owl won this award. When she told us about the award, we clapped really hard. Brown Owl deserves this award for always making sure we have the best time at Brownies every week. Brownies is so much fun, Brown Owl always helps everybody with a big smile."*

About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is the UK's largest youth organisation dedicated completely to girls, with around 370,000 members. Girls can do anything. We help them know that, whether they're 4 or 18 or in between. All girls have a home at Girlguiding – whoever they are, and wherever they are. We show them a world of possibilities, big and small. We help them think big

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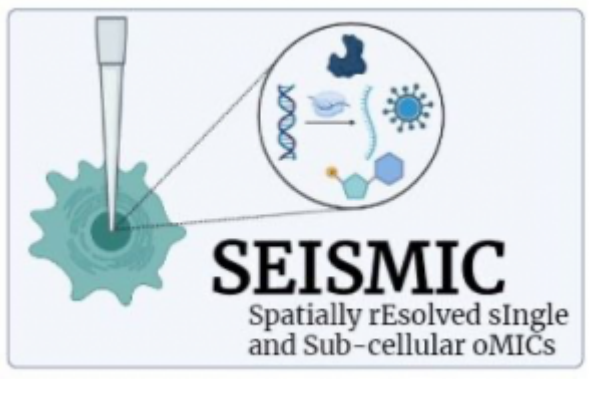
and be bold in a space where they can be themselves, get creative, explore, and have fun. We're a powerful collective voice – with girls, led by girls – changing the world for the better.

We're 300,000 Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers, who come together to laugh, learn, explore and have adventures, in communities across the UK and virtually. We're 70,000 volunteers who make guiding happen by giving time, talent and enthusiasm. Registered Charity No 306016 girlguiding.org.uk

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Seismic change at Surrey University

28 May 2023



A new national research facility could significantly improve our understanding of infectious diseases, ageing and cancers, leading to novel treatments and vaccines.

The University of Surrey's SEISMIC facility will offer scientists access to technology that enables them to pick up single cells or even parts of cells and measure the spatial position of biomarkers like proteins, metabolites and lipids.

Funded by £2.8 million from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and industry, SEISMIC uses an advanced type of microscope manufactured by Yokogawa Corporation.

Professor Melanie Bailey, Director of the SEISMIC facility at the University of Surrey, said:

"Thanks to SEISMIC, we've made a breakthrough in measuring lipids in individual mammalian cells. This new technology is a game changer because it allows scientists to measure important biomarkers while keeping track of where they are in the cell. This is important for understanding how healthy cells work and how infections or cancer can affect them.

"We're really excited about this because it will help us better understand how cells communicate with each other, and this knowledge could lead to new ways to fight diseases."

SEISMIC enables single-cell and sub-cellular analysis, which will help scientists understand what happens under defined conditions and how cells signal to each other.

Dr Dany Beste, Senior Lecturer in Microbial Metabolism at the University of Surrey, said:

"The new facility is free for academics working in BBSRC-funded areas and also available to scientists in industry. We are confident SEISMIC will enhance scientific training in single-cell work and overcome some of the challenges in this area."

SEISMIC is the University of Surrey's third national research facility with the Ion Beam Centre and the Environmental Flow Laboratory.

Prof Bailey said:

"The combination of SEISMIC, the proton beam facility and the Ion Beam Centre are a boon to Surrey's scientific and business communities and could allow us to understand the interaction between cancer cells and radiation in more detail. This has enormous potential and we are excited to welcome researchers to use our new facility."

Surrey University News.

Epsom and Ewell planning improving after Government threat?

28 May 2023



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Three Surrey councils have been warned that their planning departments are “not good enough” and threatened with having their decision-making powers stripped.

Guildford, Waverley, and **Epsom and Ewell Borough Councils** have each been written to by the Housing Secretary Michael Gove over their “very poor” quality of service that fell “far below” expected thresholds.

Councils must determine at least 70 per cent of non-major planning applications within eight weeks – or agree to an extension. The three Surrey councils have fallen well below that figure, the department said.
Mr Gove was therefore “minded” to designate the councils, meaning developers could bypass them completely and submit planning applications directly to the Planning Inspectorate. The impact effectively strips a local authority’s say over planning matters.

The letter to all three councils, part of a group of 10 nationally to be given final warning, read:

“The Government is clear that having an efficient and effective planning service at local authority level is essential to delivering the homes, building and investment the country needs.
“The planning performance regime was introduced to ensure that all local planning authorities contribute to this objective. I have significant concerns about the performance of a handful of local authorities including your council.”

For Guildford, its performance of 50.1 per cent between October 2020 and September 2022 was far below the expected threshold of 70 per cent. In **Epsom and Ewell that level was 52.5 percent**, and in Waverley it was 61.7 per cent.

The letter continued: “That is indicative of a very poor quality service to local residents and a significant deterrent to investment in your local housing market and wider economy. That is not good enough, and despite some more encouraging recent data, I am therefore minded to designate [the council]. “

Mr Gove has now asked the Planning Inspectorate to prepare for designations over the summer period but said they had until June to make the required improvement to their planning service and “to exceed our performance thresholds and stay above it consistently”.

If levels were to drop again, he said, he would “ not hesitate” to use his “powers to designate your council later this year”.

Waverley Conservatives have since called on the council’s ruling coalition to “get a grip” on planning.
Councillor Carole Cockburn, acting leader of Waverley Conservatives, said: “Communities and local businesses have had the threat of the planning department being taken into special measures hanging over them for months because of the Lib Dem-Labour-Green-Farnham Residents Party coalition administration’s inability to deal with the problem. They need to get a grip, and fast, to save our local voice in planning matters. Otherwise, people and businesses across Waverley will continue to suffer.”

A spokesperson for Waverley Borough Council said that planning performance suffered in 2021 and early 2022, was a result of the pandemic, “teething issues” with a new planning IT system, an increase in applications following lockdown and a nationwide shortage of planning officers.

Since then, they said there had been a “significant uplift in planning performance, and we are making headway in reducing the backlog of planning applications, but caseloads for our officers remain high” . Staffing remains a “significant challenge”.

They added: “Mr Gove has acknowledged the improvement in our performance and rather than moving to formally designate the council, has given us the opportunity to demonstrate this improvement over a longer period of time.”

Waverley Borough Council portfolio holder for planning and economic development, Councillor Liz Townsend, said: “We have been working closely with the Planning Advisory Service to improve our performance, and during the three most recent quarters 83 per cent, 92 per cent and 96 per cent of non-major applications respectively, were determined within the allotted time – significantly above the Government’s 70 per cent target. Our view is that designation is not appropriate and would be counterproductive to sustaining and improving on the gains in planning performance we have achieved over the last year.”

A Guildford Borough Council spokesperson said that it have been working to reduce backlog since June but that caseloads remain high. They said: “To supplement our internal planning team and improve performance, we have employed external planning consultants and temporary planning officers.
“With housing and the cost of living so high in Surrey, recruiting and retaining talent in the South-East remains a significant challenge. However, we are actively recruiting new permanent planners to help build a resilient planning function. Our new executive head of planning development, Claire Upton-Brown, took up post on March 20, 2023. She has a strong history of turning services around and is well qualified to address the challenges we are facing, with the support of the senior management and councillor team.”

Jackie King, chief executive of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** said the authority was hopeful the secretary of state would recognise the “significant” improvements it had made in recent months. She said: “The council has been fully aware of this historic issue relating to performance over that period, which was a result of Covid and capacity-related issues. “Having acknowledged the issues, the council took swift decisive action to address issues, resulting in the recruitment of a new management team in early 2022, the securing of additional staffing resourcing within the department as well as investing in IT and improved ways of working. Additional process reviews and follow on improvements were identified and implemented. All actions and process improvements have the full support of members. As a result of the council’s actions, performance on planning applications has improved rapidly and significantly. Since early 2022, the council has continued to determine well over 90 per cent of planning applications within the statutory timescale target.”

She added: “Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has demonstrated a sustained improvement in service and performance and have been in regular contact with officials at DLUHC over the past year to keep them up to date with the progress which the council has made. When the Minister reviews Epsom and Ewell’s performance again in June, the council will be

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able show five successive quarters of performance well above the 70 per cent target:

APR/MAY/JUN 2022 – 95 per cent
JUL/AUG/SEP 2022 – 92 per cent
OCT/NOV/DEC 2022 – 94 per cent
JAN/FEB/MAR 2023 – 96 per cent
APR/MAY/JUN 2023 – 97 per cent (to date)

“Once reviewed we are hopeful that the minister will acknowledge and recognise that the issues the council faced were historic and temporary in nature and this council has taken significant proactive steps to address and improve.”

The full list of councils written to by Michal Gove were:

Calderdale, Cotswold, **Epsom and Ewell**, Guildford, Hinckley and Bosworth, Pendle, Portsmouth, Vale of White Horse and Waverley councils, as well as the Peak District National Park Authority.

A Surrey Borough funds legal fight to stop oil drilling

28 May 2023



The June 8th judicial review against the Government’s decision to allow fossil fuel drilling near an **Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** will go ahead. Waverley Borough Council held a special meeting of its executive committee to approve the £82,500 in funding to proceed – £32,500 for legal costs with a further £50,000 set aside in case it is liable for the oil driller’s costs.

According to the published papers, the executive considered “it a moral imperative to continue its legal challenge”. The money was approved on Thursday, May 11, as the council continues its four-year battle to stop UK Oil and Gas from drilling at Loxeley Well in Dunsfold – and means the judicial review into the exploratory drilling of £123 million of oil by UK Oil and Gas (UKOG) can proceed.

Addressing the meeting was Councillor Steve Williams, Green Party member and portfolio holder for environment and sustainability. He said: “In July 2019, we held a listening panel where we could listen to the views of residents on this proposal that was in the air to undertake on-shore drilling in Waverley, in Dunsfold. We listened and we listened to the concern after concern in terms of the local environment as well as to the planet and the people of Dunsfold. The impact was absolutely clear and from that point on Waverley Borough Council saw it as its mission to do exactly that, to protect Dunsfold and to stop the drilling. It was consistent in terms of our position in declaring a climate emergency and committing ourselves to carbon neutrality.”

The original planning applications were rejected by Surrey County Council’s planning committee members in 2020. UKCOG then mounted an appeal which was eventually called in for review by the Secretary of State, Michael Gove. Mr Gove recused himself due to possible conflicts of interest, but former Housing Minister, Stuart Andrew ruled in favour of the plans.

Cllr Williams added: “Now is the opportunity for Waverley executive to follow this through.We would, if we did not do so, be inconsistent with our previous clear commitment on this issue. We would be neglecting our duty to the people of Dunsfold, we would be flying in the face of our climate emergency. It is imperative, for if we are to be successful in this, and I very much hope we shall be, but we should be putting our money where our mouth is, for the people of Dunsfold, for the natural environment, and for the planet.” He said the council must “take the next step and secure that judicial review in the anticipation of the outcome we’ve been working for four years”.

Cllr Liz Townsend, Lib Dem member and portfolio holder for planning and economic development, said the application had “wide implications”, not just for the borough, but the country as a whole. She said: “It’s difficult to believe that the UK already has 509 fossil fuel sites specifically in protected areas. More than any other country in the world. South Downs national park already holds nine oil and gas sites. If the Loxley well site is successful how many other sites will be allowed?”

She added, while some may view this as a David versus Goliath battle we “should remember who was the winner of that conflict”.

The committee heard that the cost to residents would work out to about 65p per person but had the potential to set a national precedent.

The committee also called on Dunsfold and Alfold Parish Councils to offer their “substantive” and vocal support.

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