

# Child victim of Co-Vid constraints?

6 June 2023



A five-month-old who died in his baby bouncer could have been part of a “systemic failure” of social services that were there to get the “best outcomes” for the children in his family.

“Baby Acer”, a twin who was described as a “a loved and happy child”, died in January 2021. His death came after social services had been involved with his family for 14 years, with his siblings having been on three child protection plans and three child in need plans, all under the category of neglect.

A Safeguarding practice review carried out by the Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership into the baby’s death said the covid pandemic impacted on his monitoring at home, and set out the history of “dangerous behaviours”, substance abuse and social services involvement with the family.

Moir Murray, the lead reviewer, pointed to “a short-sighted decision” in closing the family’s case and removing the children from child protection and child in need plans, as well as “a lost opportunity” to look at the safeguarding risks to the unborn twins by not convening a pre-birth assessment for the mother.

What does the review say?

The review said: “Similarly, after their birth, consideration should have been given to convening a pre-discharge meeting in order to consider the risks presented to premature, low-weight babies returning home to parents where chronic neglect of their children had been a consistent feature of their parenting.”

Ms Murray said the 14 years of involvement should be seen in the context of “the absence of a multi-agency systemic approach to assessing the impact on the children” of being exposed to “chronic neglect and the consequences of their parents’ dangerous behaviours”.

She also said it “could be construed” that despite the known risk factors to Acer and his twin, “there was a lack of a coordinated approach by professionals” to address the safeguarding risks presented to the twins’ health and wellbeing.

Councillor **Sinead Mooney**, cabinet member for children and families at Surrey County Council, described Acer’s death as tragic and said the review highlighted “some areas where safeguarding practice at that time should have been better”. She added that the partnership took the safeguarding of children “extremely seriously” and would continue to ensure “all the necessary changes were made and lessons were learned”.

According to Ms Murray’s review, Acer’s mother had woken up on the morning of January 15, 2021 and found him lifeless in his baby bouncer in the living room where she, Acer and his twin sibling were sleeping.

She called an ambulance, and Acer was taken to hospital having suffered a cardiac arrest. Despite attempts to resuscitate him, Acer died aged five months old.

Acer was known as ‘Little Man’ because he was the smaller twin, and the review described both parents as “deeply distressed at the loss of their child”. In his family at the time of Acer’s death was his mother, father, twin brother and five-year-old sibling, as well as siblings aged 14 and eight, who had a different father from the mother’s previous relationship.

The family had been known to police and social services since 2006, because of domestic abuse against the mother by her then partner, according to the report. Child protection and child in need plans followed, until the mother was arrested in January 2019 for alleged assault and criminal damage, followed by a week when the children were cared for by their respective fathers.

Ms Murray said neither father want to take formal responsibility of caring for the children, despite each having raised concerns about the mother’s mental health and substance abuse, and that the children returned to their mother when a number of the charges did not proceed.

‘Acer was a loved and happy child’. According to the review: “The tragic death of Acer severely affected his parents and siblings, as well as those professionals who knew him. That it happened at a time of an unprecedented pandemic meant that the period prior to his death was one in which there was less interaction with frontline practitioners than may have normally been the case.”

Acer and his twin were born at 32 weeks in August 2020, spent two weeks in a hospital neo-natal unit and then were sent home. Both had tested negative on a toxicology test, with neither showing symptoms of withdrawal, checked because of the mother’s history of substance misuse.

The review shows a health visitor allocated to the family made five home visits before Acer’s death, and had “stressed the dangers” of sleeping on the sofa in the sitting room with the twins, as well as sleeping in bed with them. It also said that the mother’s medication and drug use “was known to impact on her ability to stay awake and alert to the babies’ needs”.

When the health visitor had raised concerns about co-sleeping and propping a bottle to feed the babies, the mother had said she was “confident in knowing how to care for the twins”, given that she had three older children.

But the review also said that the mother had told Ms Murray she was dyslexic and had difficulty reading, and that the mother’s “level of understanding of what was being explained to her may appear to be greater than it was in reality”. She would sometimes look to the father for help on what was being said.

Ms Murray’s review said of the meeting: “It was when the named nurse for child death reviews explained in simple language that babies can die if they are not laid on their backs in a cot that mother said she now understood how dangerous it was to sleep with the babies on the sofa and in bed, and how she wished she had never placed Acer in the baby bouncing chair.”

The mother told the lead reviewer she was “shocked” to have had her children removed from her care after Acer’s death, blaming it on “a faulty baby bouncing chair”. The review said: “The tragic loss of their baby son was devastatingly apparent when the lead reviewer met the parents.

“That Acer was a loved and happy child was evident from the way mother and father spoke about him and from the many photographs on display.” Closing case in March 2020 was ‘unwise decision’ ut Ms Murray said: “Given that from 2008 onwards until 2021, when Acer died, the children had been on a total of three child protection plans and three child in need plans, all under the category of neglect, it can be said that there was a systemic failure to achieve the best outcomes for the children of this family.”

Closing the case in March 2020, when the mother’s pregnancy with twins known, was an “unwise decision” according to the review, “given the history of chronic neglect of the children and the dangerous, risktaking behaviours of mother and father”.

It went on to say: “If the case had remained open there would have been the opportunity to continue to monitor the children and risk assess mother’s behaviour during her pregnancy and after the birth of the twins.”

Cllr Mooney said: “The report outlines the need to ensure appropriate pre-birth risk assessments are carried out, although it is noted that steps have already been taken to improve practice in this area.

“The report also highlights the continued need to remind carers about the risks associated with co-sleeping, and stresses the importance of effective multi-agency communication and practice throughout, particularly when assessing the impact on chronically neglected children. The report also recognises the significant impact the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had on this case, particularly on the delivery of training to practitioners, and steps have since been taken to make training programmes more accessible online.

“As a partnership, we take the safeguarding of children extremely seriously and will continue to ensure all the necessary changes are made and lessons are learned. The Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership has shared the recommendations of this report with all relevant agencies in Surrey.”

## Surrey celebrates life on the road

6 June 2023



June is Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month and **Surrey Heritage** uses this opportunity to raise awareness of the community's unique heritage and help people trace their Gypsy family history. If you're tracing Gypsy ancestors take a look at Surrey Heritage's comprehensive guide for Surrey sources.

And what better way to enjoy the month than go to this year's Romany Day celebrations at the Rural life Living Museum, Tilford, on 11 June, produced in partnership with the Surrey Gypsy Traveller Communities Forum. Surrey History Centre and **Ewell's Bourne Hall Museum** will be at this fantastic event which explores the past and present of Romany culture, heritage and tradition. Watch craft demonstrations with paper and wood flower making, peg and basket making, and experience the expression of Romany heritage through music, dance and language, including a poetry slam. For further details see the Rural Life website: <https://rural-life.org.uk/events/romany-day/>.

For information on a wealth of other heritage and history events of Surrey visit the latest events and news from the Surrey History Centre [HERE](#).

## Epsom Hospital's speedy chemo for cancer kids

6 June 2023



A mum says she is "amazed" by a **new chemotherapy service** that has proven to be invaluable for young cancer patients and their families. **Nathan Dunne**, nine, is usually "back home and in his pyjamas" within 90 minutes of leaving the house to have the cancer treatment – known as Vincristine – at **Epsom Hospital**, and is in the treatment room itself for just half an hour.

Mum **Oana** is full of nothing but praise for the service, and says it has significantly reduced the amount of time they spend in hospital for appointments – with Nathan previously receiving his Vincristine dose elsewhere. "It's so much quicker, and Nathan gets everyone's full attention – plus, the toy box is there already waiting for him on arrival!" said Oana.

"The staff are amazing, they know what they have to do and are always helpful – and if they don't know the answers to my questions, they will find out. We're in and out really quickly, and I look forward to the days when we are in Epsom Hospital now. We know the nurses who are working, and we see often the same faces. They know our children and they remember the routine that works for us – for Nathan, that's counting '1, 2, 3' when the needle goes in, and back again when it's taken out. I'm just amazed at how quickly we're back home after a visit for Vincristine."

Nathan – who lives with his family in **Worcester Park** – was diagnosed with leukaemia in June 2020. Aged six at the time, he started to complain of tummy aches, and also started to feel really tired – with Oana recalling how one day she had to carry him home from the park because he couldn't walk.

On another occasion Nathan had a wobbly tooth that wouldn't stop bleeding for two days, and he also had a swollen finger that hurt when using his iPad.

Concerned about her son, Oana sought help, and Nathan was eventually referred to St Helier Hospital for blood tests. Later on, the family received devastating news: there was a 90 per cent chance Nathan had leukaemia. "We were devastated – it was the shock of our lives," said Oana. "I didn't think for a moment that was what it would be."

The diagnosis was officially confirmed shortly afterwards, and Nathan spent a night at St Helier Hospital before being transferred to **Epsom Hospital's** paediatric oncology unit (POSCU).

He was then moved to the Royal Marsden on his seventh birthday, and spent the next few months in the care of the teams there. Oana says Nathan understood what was happening to some extent – knowing "there was something wrong with his blood" and that he was "very poorly". Treatment started quickly and every day.

Now, Nathan visits **Epsom** every four weeks to have treatment and is at the Royal Marsden every 12 weeks – with Oana saying the care he has received and continues to receive at both as "incredible". Nathan is due to finish treatment in August, and is one of 10 patients to have now received a regular Vincristine infusion at Epsom Hospital.

**Dr Beccy Suckling**, Chief Medical Officer at Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust, said: "Ensuring our patients receive outstanding care is our biggest priority. Our new Vincristine clinics are something to be really proud of, and a lot of work has gone into getting us to this point. It's fantastic to hear that young cancer patients like Nathan are being treated so well by our brilliant teams – and as well as thanking our wonderful staff for the care they provide, I'd like to thank Oana and Nathan for their really lovely words about that care."

**Lucy Lloyd-James**, Lead Nurse for Epsom's Paediatric Oncology Shared Care Unit, said: "Epsom Hospital is much closer to home for many of our young patients, and we've had such wonderful feedback about our Vincristine clinics and how quickly patients are in and out. We know how scary and overwhelming it can be for our young patients and their families, and this is one way we can make such a difficult experience just a bit easier."

St George's, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group

[Epsom and Ewell Times say: Thank you Nathan and Oana for your courage sharing your story.]



## Make way for Epsom Derby visitors?

6 June 2023



Rail strikes will reduce services to Epsom, Epsom Downs and Tattenham Corner stations Friday – Oaks Day and Saturday – Derby Day. With over 100,000 spectators anticipated to attend the annual great flat race, held in Epsom for over 240 years, abandoning trains for cars, local roads can be expected to be jammed.

Maybe give that trek to the DIY store a miss this Saturday?

A Department for Transport spokesperson said: “These strikes have been coordinated by union leaders to disrupt passengers in a week which will see major events such as the first-ever all-Manchester FA Cup final, the **Epsom Derby** and a number of concerts and festivals across the UK.

“Not content with impacting the hundreds of thousands of people who have looked forward to these events all year round, unions are also targeting their own members’ pockets by forcing them to miss out on pay every time they strike.

“The government has facilitated a fair and reasonable pay offer, now union leaders must do the right thing and put this to their members.”

The unions say they have not been given a pay offer they can recommend to their members. Aslef rejected the government’s 4% offer, which they described as “risible” since train drivers have not had a pay rise for four years.

A special meeting of **The Epsom and Walton Downs Conservators** was convened last night in the Town Hall to discuss arrangements for the Derby. It went into secret session and we can only speculate that the impact of the rail strikes was likely to have been discussed. Cllr **Steven McCormick** was confirmed as chair and was joined on the podium by **Simon Durrant** of **The Jockey Club**, owners of Epsom Downs and the racecourse.

## Epsom Hospital Radio goes National

6 June 2023



Back in 1978 two patients in Epsom District Hospital were having a discussion about music. It turned out that they were both DJs and between them they decided to launch Epsom District Hospital Radio. It took a couple of years to acquire funding, equipment and support but in 1981 the station broadcast its first programmes.

Over the ensuing years the station has grown in both size and reputation, continuing to entertain and amuse the patients as well as hosting events such as school fetes, the Dorking Big Weekend, the Epsom Common Day and the Epsom and Ewell Community Fayre.

2023 marks the 45th anniversary of the station and is a landmark year. Surrey’s finest and fastest growing hospital radio station will now be broadcasting on the internet. Thanks to generous donations from **Epsom and Ewell Times**, Kane Construction, 3ti and the on-going support of Epsom Rotary Club, **from Wednesday 31st May** you will be able to listen to Epsom Hospital Radio wherever you are in the UK. The online launch at 8pm begins with a guest appearance by **Epsom Rotary**, one of the sponsors of EHR Online.



Epsom Hospital Radio’s President **Trevor Leonard**, who recently celebrated 40 years as a member, is thrilled by the latest development. “This is a pivotal moment in the 45 year history of Epsom Hospital Radio as we will now be able to more actively engage with our wider local community, while still ensuring the patients of Epsom Hospital remain absolutely at the heart of everything we do.

“As well as the superb efforts of our current Station Manager, Chief Engineer, Management Team and members who have made internet broadcasting possible, this major development is also accredited to all those who have volunteered at Epsom Hospital Radio throughout the years and in doing so, helped to lay the foundations for us to take this major step forward today”.

Current Station Manager **Ian Daggett** said it reflected the station’s desire to progress over the last couple of years. “It’s a small step in the world of broadcasting, but for Epsom Hospital Radio it’s a giant leap. Being on the internet is something we’ve wanted to do for quite a while and we’re really looking forward to reaching out to the people of Epsom and Ewell and the surrounding areas”.



If you want to tune in to Epsom Hospital Radio, a click to listen link is now available on the homepage, which is [www.epsomhospitalradio.org.uk](http://www.epsomhospitalradio.org.uk)

You will be able to enjoy Epsom Hospital Radio playing your favourite hits from across the decades, alongside an eclectic mix of themed programs from classical to comedy, country to rock, specialist music genres, interviews with local people and the occasional celebrity as well.

You can also request a song for a patient in the hospital or a listener anywhere via the request line which is 01372 735999 or via email [studio@epsomhospitalradio.org.uk](mailto:studio@epsomhospitalradio.org.uk)

## Aiming high in local government reporting

6 June 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.....

6 June 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:



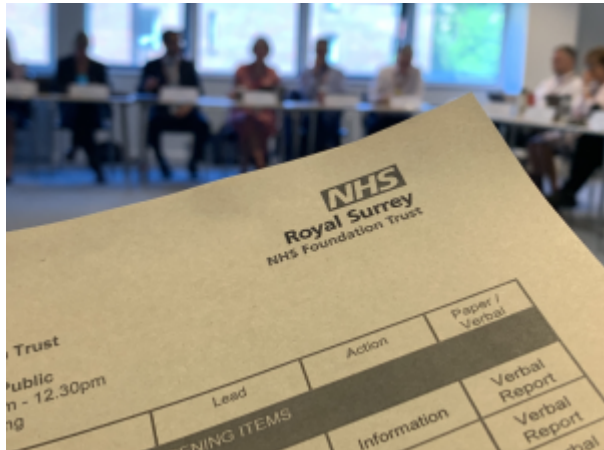
<https://www.tickettailor.com/events/satisfiedeyeinternationalfilmfestival>

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## Junior doctor strikes to be ‘monthly’ in Surrey?

6 June 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?

6 June 2023



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

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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!

6 June 2023



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 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.”

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