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

26th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

Council’s secret strategy on public resources?

17 November 2022



Epsom and Ewell’s powerful **Strategy and Resources Committee** went into secret session on four items of public interest at its meeting Tuesday 15th November. The four items were:

1. INCOME GENERATING OPPORTUNITY
2. COST OF LIVING PAYMENT
3. LAND RETENTION
4. COMMERCIAL PROPERTY UPDATE

In each case the secrecy was justified on the following ground:

“…. the business to be transacted/nature of the proceedings……. deals with information relating to the financial or business affairs of the Committee and third parties and the public interest in maintaining the exemption currently outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.”

However, the Committee did not close the meeting during discussions on the motion to close. During that discussion **Councillor Eber Kington** (RA Ewell Court Ward) revealed in public that the “income generating opportunity” related to a crematorium.

Councillor David Gulland (LibDem College Ward) argued that the proposal “is an interesting development which would benefit from a wide-ranging discussion with our residents … I feel we’re trying to be too secretive…we should be open with what we’re trying to achieve with our assets.” The Interim Chief Executive, responded that “the reason this is a restricted item is because it’s a commercial opportunity and we need to protect our negotiations…with potential suppliers, etc”. However, **Councillor Kate Chinn** (Lab, Court Ward) agreed with Cllr. Gulland. “Part of making the business case is to see if there’s a need for it in the borough,” she said. “Surely the easiest way to do that is to ask the residents.”

It was at this point that Councillor Kington made the statement that “I want to get as much as I can out in the open. But what we have here is the Council looking at a possibility of a crematorium.” He went on to defend the proposal to exclude press and public: “ [If this] is a runner, it would have to come back to this committee and it may well be that that will be the time when it will be a public document. We don’t want to give anyone the heads up that this is what we are planning. In most cases, we will put things not on pink paper if we can help it.” [Ed. “Pink paper” is the colour of secret papers.]

The Residents’ Association majority on the committee agreed with Councillor Kington and excluded press and public from any further details of this and the other three items.

At the same meeting:

VOTER ID LIKELY FOR 2023 – BUT COUNCILS MAY HAVE TO PICK UP THE BILL

Following public consultation, a new polling station is expected to be in operation for the borough elections in 2023. This is to be situated in the arts centre at the newly refurbished Horton Chapel and will serve the residents of the new Horton Ward. This new ward will comprise the four former hospital sites of Clarendon Park, Livingstone Park, Manor Park and Noble Park, plus some roads that are currently in Court Ward around the northern end of Hook Road.

Receiving the detailed report that included this information Councillor **Hannah Dalton** (Residents’ Association, Stoneleigh Ward), asked about the Council’s preparedness for the introduction of voter id at polling stations. “There will be a lot of communication from the government about this,” the council officer replied. But he went to say that it will be a challenge getting it ready because the Council will be able to issue identity slips where people don’t have photo identity.

Councillor **Liz Frost** (Residents’ Association, Woodcote Ward) followed this up by asking about the cost implications of this for the Borough Council. The Interim Chief Executive, stated that “there are discussions going on with government at the moment … At the moment, the proposal is that local councils will fund ID cards … It’s an ongoing discussion.”

Surrey County pays asylum child £15,000

17 November 2022

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A “vulnerable”, unaccompanied asylum-seeking child has been given £15,000 by Surrey County Council after years of failings in his care which led to him sleeping on the floor of a restaurant where his friend worked.
The child twice attempted suicide and was hospitalised because of his mental health, having arrived in the UK alone aged 12.

After his arrival in March 2016, the youngster was found local foster placements by the county council until April of that year, followed by a residential placement in Manchester. An investigation by the Local Government Ombudsman after “Mr X” complained about the council said the authority did not “appear to have considered anything other than a ‘roof over his head’” at the later stages of his time under its responsibility. The ombudsman said the child was “extremely distressed and unhappy” at the placement in Manchester, telling staff he was 15, and not 12. The older age was accepted “without question” by the council, then the child ran away from the placement and attempted suicide.

There then followed several moves, including a placement with a foster carer of the same nationality, residential placements, including one in Staffordshire, and him being detained under the Mental Health Act. While he was in hospital, after a second suicide attempt, Mr X told staff he was not as old as he had said, but the council “refused to accept” his younger age according to the ombudsman.

The report broke down the “symbolic” payment of £15,000 as £10,000 to reflect the impact on Mr X’s education, £2,000 for the failure to assess Mr X’s age and needs leading to a lack of appropriate placements and care, £2,000 for his time spent homeless and £1,000 for distress caused, including delay to his asylum claim and legal action taken to establish his age.T he investigator said Mr X “was vulnerable, and his distress was severe and prolonged”. They added: “It is not possible for me to calculate a financial remedy for the distress Mr X has suffered as a result of fault by the council. There is no formula I can use. Any recommendation I make can only be a symbolic payment to acknowledge his distress. It is not ‘compensation’.”

The report showed that the child’s mental health deteriorated in early 2017, with social care records saying he was distressed and preoccupied by what had become of his family. After he was discharged from hospital, he repeatedly ran away from his residential placement in Staffordshire, eventually failing to come back and being recorded by the council as living “independently” when he could have been as young as 13.

Requesting a foster placement from the council, and being told there were none available, Mr X refused the offers of independent or semi-independent placements from the council. It was at this stage the ombudsman’s investigation said the council “should have been concerned with ensuring suitable aftercare to ensure Mr X’s recovery” but seemed to be looking only to provide “a roof over his head”.

Between January and April 2018, he was “sofa surfing” in London and sometimes slept on the floor of a restaurant where a friend worked, according to the ombudsman’s investigation. He then got help from the Refugee Council and a solicitor, who found him a foster placement and asked the council to formally assess Mr X’s age, with the authority concluding he was the older of the two ages that had been given.

This assessment was criticised by the courts in May 2019, who decided he was the younger of the two ages when Mr X challenged the council’s process. The council upheld parts of complaint made by Mr X, which included that it failed to carry out an age assessment when he first became “looked after” and that it was wrong to appoint his allocated social worker to do the age assessment. As part of the complaint made by Mr X directly to the council, the authority also accepted it had failed to assist Mr X with his asylum claim, to arrange suitable education for him and to provide suitable placements (because of its failure to assess Mr X’s age and his care needs).

He was offered £2,000 compensation as part of the decision as well as an apology and an explanation of how problems had been addressed.

While the ombudsman welcomed steps taken such as the setting up of a specialist team to care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, the investigator said the council seemed to have missed “the bigger picture” in dealing with the complaint. The findings said: “Mr X was a looked after child. The council was his parent. While the council accepts there were serious shortcomings in the care it provided Mr X, it has not responded in the way I would expect a parent to respond in the circumstances.”

The ombudsman found that for two and a half years, the council had treated the asylum seeker as “almost an adult when he was in fact a vulnerable child”, which impacted on decisions about accommodation and education. The report said he had now settled and returned to education, wishing to “move on, pursue his studies and make something of his life in England”.

The ombudsman said: “In making his complaint, he was keen to ensure council services for other young people in similar circumstances improved.”

A county council spokesperson said they could not go into specific detail for safeguarding reasons, but said the authority would always try to place children in accommodation appropriate to their needs and a full assessment would be done to assess this, with fostering being the first option explored. But they added that in some cases, children would come to the attention of the authority in an emergency and a full assessment was not always possible.

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The spokesperson said: “We wholly accept the Ombudsman’s decision and we sincerely apologise for any distress that was caused. Our Social Workers are trained to undertake comprehensive age assessments in line with national standards. We also have an agreed accommodation strategy that places an emphasis on both the development of accommodation within Surrey and the recruitment of more foster carers.”

Surrey road safety played out on the pitch

17 November 2022



On Friday 4 November **Surrey Fire and Rescue Service**’s football team played host to **Surrey Police**, with the shared goal of improving road safety during the winter period.

The fixture was planned to highlight the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and general road safety during the winter period. Those in attendance heard a speech from Assistant Chief Fire Officer Jon Simpson, who took the opportunity to underscore the importance of safety on Surrey’s roads, and the need to improve behaviours. He was joined at the event by Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey **Ellie Vesey-Thompson**, Chair of Surrey County Council Councillor **Helyn Clac**k, Councillor **Denise Turner Stewart**, Mole Valley MP **Sir Paul Beresford**, and Surrey FA’s CEO, **Sally Lockye**r.

There were 330 road traffic collision incidents with Surrey Fire and Rescue Service involvement between November 2021 and February 2022 and in 2021 there were 24 Fatalities, 647 Serious casualties and 2490 slight casualties on the county’s roads, 15% of which involved young drivers. The services are encouraging drivers not to drive under the influence, as well as warning against the dangers of distractions while behind the wheel. They are also calling on motorists not to speed and to take caution with risks such as adverse weather conditions and country roads.

Filming was carried out during the match, with players from both sides interviewed about their experiences in responding to road traffic collisions and the impact they had on the lives of those involved in these incidents, as well as on themselves.

Surrey Police took the bragging rights at full-time, emerging with a 1-0 victory from a competitive game. However, it is hoped that the main result from the fixture will be the powerful, football-based road safety campaign which will run throughout the World Cup and across the winter. 115 drink or drug impaired drivers were apprehended during the previous three international tournaments in which England’s Senior Men’s Team have featured (Euro 2016, 2018 World Cup, Euro 2020), and 78% of these were male.

Commenting on the event, **Jon Simpson**, Assistant Chief Fire Officer for Surrey Fire and Rescue Service stated: *“Whilst we are all here to enjoy a game of football between the services, it also gives us a great opportunity to highlight a really important safety message to a key target audience, as we raise awareness of safe driving among young people – predominantly young males.*

“We all have a responsibility here to improve our own behaviours on the road and encourage them in others to ensure we all come home safe this winter. During the World Cup, plan your journey home on public transport, do not mix drinking with driving. If you are driving home for the games, then allow extra time for your journey. Speeding could result in three points you really do not need, or the consequences could be even worse – the loss of a life. Adapt your speed appropriately for the road and weather conditions and make sure you always wear a seatbelt.”

Chief Inspector for Roads Policing at Surrey and Sussex Police, **Michael Hodder**, added: “*Road safety is a huge priority for us at Surrey Police and sadly we often work closely with our blue light colleagues at Surrey Fire and Rescue when dealing with collisions on the county’s roads. Although we know the vast majority of road users are conscientious and law-abiding citizens, there is a minority of people who just disregard the law and put not only their lives, but other people’s lives at risk. It really is quite simple – always drive with due care and attention, stick to speed limits and follow the laws to keep all those using the roads in Surrey as safe as possible.”*

Ellie Vesey-Thompson, Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey commented: *“It was great to support the police and fire service working together to share the importance of road safety. The win for Surrey Police was an added bonus of the day!*

“It concerns and saddens me that our young people aged 17-24 disproportionately die in road traffic collisions. With cold and wet weather as well as social events like the World Cup and Christmas parties, it’s a really key time to be sharing the message around driving safely. I urge anyone heading out with friends this winter to ensure you have a safe way of getting home – be that public transport, a taxi or a designated driver. It is also important to always pay attention and to drive to the conditions of the road, particularly when wet or icy.

“Ensuring safer Surrey roads is a key priority in Commissioner Lisa Townsend’s Police and Crime Plan, which is why we

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are pleased to support initiatives such as Safe Drive Stay Alive which helps educate young people on the dangers of the 'fatal five'; drink or drug driving, speeding, using a phone whilst driving, not wearing a seatbelt and driving whilst distracted.

"By working together to spread this message we can reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads."

Surrey Fire and Rescue Service have shared their top tips for road safety, for drivers both young and old, here.

Surrey County Council News

Epsom woman gets out of a mango pickle

17 November 2022



A woman was sent home from **Epsom General Hospital** with a sliver of mango seed stuck in her throat, leading to an update of guidance around patients who have been eating soft foods. The 57-year-old went to Epsom hospital emergency department saying she was having trouble swallowing after eating mango pickle.
A doctor looked at her, but could not see anything obviously wrong, with the patient not drooling, still able to swallow and no foreign body visible on examination. The patient was sent home with the advice that it could be a scratch or gastritis, and told to return if she was more unwell.

A board meeting of the Epsom and St Helier hospital trust heard she then came back four days later unable to swallow at all and with a sore throat, but still nothing visible to doctors. On a slide titled "the deadly mango" in a learning from complaints presentation, board members heard how the hospital then discovered an oesophageal tear and air in her chest after a CT scan.

Documents show there was "low level of risk" given she had been eating soft food, and that sharp foreign bodies causing problems are usually only related to fish or broken bones such as in chicken, so this was not considered.
There are no guidelines either nationally or at the trust for this sort of situation.

After discussions with other hospitals, she went for surgery in Guildford, where a mango seed sliver was removed from her oesophagus and she stayed for a week on intravenous antibiotics. Luckily the patient made a full recovery, but did make a complaint against the hospital trust.

The board meeting heard that the unnamed patient had been informed of the investigation into the incident and how new guidelines had been drawn up at the trust, to look at the symptoms patients were suffering, and not just the foods they had eaten.

Dr Richard Jennings, group chief medical officer, said that from something ridiculously obscure and exotic and unlikely ever to happen again, the trust had created pragmatic and useful learning points. He added: "I was also very happy, having felt anxious reading the title, to find it was a "potentially deadly mango".

The meeting heard that assessment of the patient was done correctly, though the investigation showed the patient probably should have been discussed with ear, nose and throat [department] if symptomatic
She also should have been told to return within 24 hours if there were no improvement.
A presentation said it was â€œvery rare to have sharp foreign body injury following soft food and usually due to foreign bodies in themâ€, such as glass or plastic.
As well as new guidelines for staff, a discharge leaflet would be created for patients who were going home with this condition.

Another MP challenger out of the blocks

17 November 2022

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Local Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrats announce local candidate and former Captain in the Royal Military Police **Helen Maguire** has been selected as the Liberal Democrat Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Epsom & Ewell. Helen has lived in Surrey with her husband and 3 children for over 11 years. In the British Army, she served in Iraq and Bosnia. Helen now runs an award-winning charity fundraising consultancy, delivering vital funding to charities nationwide. She recently won 'service Leaver of the year' in the British Ex-Forces in Business awards 2022. In her spare time Helen can be found running on Epsom Downs. She has represented Epsom & Ewell Harriers Athletic Club for over 10 years.

Image: Helen Maguire (2nd from left) with supporters in Epsom High St

Helen was a key campaigner in Esher & Walton during the 2019 General Election where she played a pivotal role in increasing the Liberal Democrat vote by 18,000 with the largest swing in the country of 27.7%. Repeating this in Epsom & Ewell would result in Helen winning the seat from the conservatives.

According to the Liberal Democrat's press release "Helen is a local community champion, volunteering her spare time to numerous charities within the constituency, an activist who fights for local issues to be heard. Following her selection earlier this month, Helen has been actively campaigning in Epsom, including protesting against the Tory plans to allow Fracking in Surrey and knocking on doors to listen to and understand first-hand about the local issues such as the Chalk Pit fiasco."

Helen Maguire stated: "I am absolutely honoured to be selected as the Liberal Democrat prospective Parliamentary candidate for Epsom & Ewell. I am standing for honesty and integrity, and a fairer society for all."

See Gina Miller's recent announcement of her ambition to stand for Parliament in Epsom and Ewell reported HERE

Surrey Ambulance employee woes far from over

17 November 2022



An NHS chief executive has never in her career seen employee relations cases of the "volume and a complexity" as at her current troubled ambulance trust. **South East Coast Ambulance Service** (SECAmb), the NHS trust which covers Surrey, is on an improvement journey, after an "inadequate" rating for how the service was led in June and a report this week which downgraded its overall rating.

The trust's interim chief executive, **Siobhan Melia**, said though she was not happy with the pace of the progress on improving the culture at the trust, she understood why it was not moving quickly. She told a board meeting on Thursday (October 27): "I have never in my career seen a volume and a complexity of [employee relations] cases that we are dealing with." She said she understood why limited staff resources and an "incredibly high case load" were contributing to this.

The meeting heard what progress was being made against two warnings given in the June report, which found a culture of "bullying, harassment and sexualised behaviour" at the trust.

A report published this week by the **Care Quality Commissio**n downgraded the trust's overall rating, finding that staff were "burnt out", working beyond their hours and not always getting breaks. But the area of "caring" was given a "good" rating in the latest report, with patients found to be treated with kindness and compassion.

Thursday's meeting focused on the two warning areas of four highlighted in the June report, namely risk, clinical governance and quality improvement, and of a culture of bullying. The latest report will be addressed at future board meetings of the ambulance trust, which covers Surrey, Kent, Sussex and parts of Hampshire.

According to meeting documents, the trust's planned outcome for concerns around culture centred on a "significant reduction in bullying and harassment", and staff feeling empowered and supported to raise concerns.
The interim chief executive said there needed to be "absolute clarity" on there being zero tolerance on behaviours that did not align with trust values, and a "decisive position" taken that sexually inappropriate behaviour would not be tolerated.

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ISSN 2753-2771

She said the backlog of cases meant people were getting “frustrated” at the length of processes because the trust was “running to catch up”. Ms Melia said she had found herself “challenged” as a woman chief executive in 2022 to have taken a sexual safety workshop in the last week. She added: “I’m listening to the lived experiences of female members of staff at SECAmb, who are talking quite openly in that workshop about some of the things that are happening. So we simply have to get more decisive, more strong in the actions that we take and continually say: ‘We will protect you as we should when you’re an employee of SECAmb’.”

Saying decisions on sanctions in proven cases needed to be “much faster”, she added that the trust needed to “deliver the actions in a much more overt way” to match words and communications that were being put out.

The trust’s executive director of human resources and organisational development, **Ali Mohammed**, said that 25 per cent of employee relations cases involved bullying, harassment or sexual safety.

He said once the initial work had been done on meeting targets set out after the CQC report and clearing the backlog of cases, more of a “learning culture” needed to be brought in at the trust. But he said ultimately it would be the staff that would be able to tell leaders if things had changed for the better. He said: “Are we winning in terms of people feeling that there’s a different culture within the organisation? That’s the key thing in the end, asking the individuals themselves because they are the best judge of it.” He said there was an “individual and collective responsibility” on all board members, managers and “every single individual within the organisation” to push the same message and the same culture. He added: “This isn’t something one person could do in isolation. I think it’s a test we should hold ourselves to as a board, and as a senior management community, that it is something that we personally will be pushing forward.”

The board’s chairman **David Astley** said the trust needed to “root out” inappropriate behaviour. He said all staff needed to feel confident and safe at work, whether on the front line or in other areas. Mr Astley added: “They’ve got to feel safe, so they can do the best job they can for their colleagues, and more importantly, the patients.”

New Fire Chief to the rescue

17 November 2022



Surrey Fire and Rescue Service have appointed **Dan Quin** as their new permanent Chief Fire Officer. Dan has been acting-up as Chief Fire Officer since June 2022, prior to that he was the county’s Deputy Chief Fire Officer since October 2019.

He has served his whole career within Surrey Fire and Rescue Service since joining over 23 years ago in 1999 as a firefighter at Leatherhead Fire Station and takes on the role following a robust interview process.

Dan is also the Vice-Chair of the **United Kingdom Rescue Organisation** who are the industry leads in advancing professional rescue skills nationally.

Speaking of his new appointment, Dan said: “I am absolutely delighted to have been appointed as Surrey’s permanent Chief Fire Officer and very much looking forward to building on the plans I put in place during the last few months as Acting Chief. As someone who has been in the service for the whole of my career, I am aware of the many strengths as well as the areas we need to improve upon. I am dedicated to making Surrey one of the best fire and rescue services in the industry and I know we have the people to help see that through.”

Council Leader **Tim Oliver** said: “I’m pleased to welcome Dan as Chief Fire Officer. After a very positive spell leading Surrey Fire and Rescue Service on an interim basis, Dan was clearly a very strong candidate for the job. I’m confident he will be a great leader of the service – knowledgeable, experienced and approachable to staff and partners across Surrey. He will continue on the improvement journey that is well underway and I’m confident SFRS is in good hands to continue its journey to being an excellent service.”

Cabinet Member for Communities and Community Protection, **Denise Turner-Stewart** said: “Having worked with Dan before and very recently too, I am very pleased to hear that he has been made our Chief Fire Officer and am looking forward to continuing to work closely alongside him. Dan brings a wealth of experience from serving the residents of Surrey for over 20 years already and it gives me great confidence that Surrey Fire and Rescue Service and the safety of residents are in good hands.”

Surrey County Council news

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Was this why she was in Epsom Saturday?

17 November 2022



Epsom and Ewell Times did not know **Gina Miller**, who visited The Market Square Saturday*, was going to announce yesterday her intention to stand against **Chris Grayling MP** at the next election. So, not a bad start for her campaign. She is standing for a party she launched earlier in the year named the "**True and Fair**" Party. This new political group states it is not about left and right but about right and wrong.

*See post: National Polio Day marked in Epsom

Quoting from its website Gina Miller states: "True & Fair is the only political party prepared to bring in radical reforms to fix the systemic failures in the UK's machinery of government, to legislate for electoral reform, Parliamentary checks and scrutiny, improve anti-corruption laws across politics and public life, and focus policy-making on fairness, and right and wrong, not right and left. A real-world plan for the future through new politics, new thinking, new partnerships."

The party has announced a grand total of 9 prospective candidates to fight seats at the next General Election. An election that must be held by January 2025 at the latest.

Gina Miller became a household name, revered and detested in equal proportions, for her spearheading a successful legal challenge against a tactic of the UK Government (the prorogation of Parliament) to get Brexit done.

Chris Grayling MP enjoys a majority over all other candidates of 4197 at the 2019 election from a total of 59,451 votes cast. The Liberal Democrats came second with 13,946 votes and Labour third with 10,266. The Greens got 2047 votes and the Borough's current Mayor, Cllr Clive Woodbridge (Residents Association) stood as an independent and received 1413 votes. Chris Grayling's traditional opponents may be dismayed if Gina Miller's intervention has the effect of increasing his first place lead.

See https://epsomandewelltimes.com/westminster

Indecent images end policeman's career

17 November 2022



A former Surrey Police special constable will never be in the profession again after failing to report unwanted illegal indecent images. According to an accelerated misconduct hearing outcome posted on the force's website, Special Constable **Alan Harvey** breached the "standards of professional behaviour" and was so serious "it warranted dismissal".

Surrey Police handed Mr Harvey's name to the LDRS on request as the hearing notice and outcome refers to him as "Special Constable Harvey". However, limited details have been released since the hearing took place on October 3.

Here's what happened:

A notice of the hearing was on the Surrey Police website on September 27, and was seen by the LDRS.
On approaching the force to gain the full name of the officer involved, which was not initially included, the notice was taken down and replaced with one with less detail on the allegations. The original notice of the hearing stated that former SC Harvey had stated, during police interview, that sometimes he would be sent indecent images of children. It said: "SC Harvey failed to report these illegal images to police so that the offenders could be prosecuted, and children safeguarded.

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Former SC Harvey continued to use the same online services despite having been sent [indecent images of children].”

According to the original hearing notice, the former SC had also accepted in police interview that he may have sent one of the indecent images of children by accident when trying to send legal adult pornography through the online service.

Chief Constable **Gavin Stephens** chaired the hearing on October 3, finding that the breach of the standards of professional behaviour was so serious that former SC Harvey should be dismissed, had he still been serving
The college of policing states that special constables are voluntary officers with the same powers as regular officers, and they take part in frontline police work.

This can mean a varied role including spending “much of their time on the streets”, patrolling in crime hotspots or taking part in crime-prevention initiatives.

A Surrey Police spokeswoman said: “The rules breached were that it breached our professional standards, the finding made was that he would have been dismissed had he still been serving and same goes for the sanctions imposed.”

*LDRS = Local Democracy Reporting Service of the BBC with which Epsom and Ewell Times is partnered.

Woking up to a very big debt problem

17 November 2022



The senior councillor responsible for **Surrey County Council**’s money will step down from its cabinet amid a “potential conflict” as the Government calls for a review of finances at the borough council she used to lead.
Woking Borough Council’s forecasted **£2.4bn debt** has been called an “outlier” by government ministers.
The now leader at Woking was sent a letter by local government minister MP **Paul Scully** on Tuesday (October 18) which said the authority had the highest level of commercial debt relative to its size for a council.

Image: Woking Borough Council. Credit Rebecca Curley.

It follows a letter that was sent to the borough council in May which said there was a need to tackle risk at local government level and protect taxpayers’ interest. Mr Scully’s letter said: “As you will be aware, the Government has in recent years expressed concerns that some authorities are putting taxpayers’ money at risk through disproportionate levels of debt, over-reliance on commercial income, or pursuing novel and risky investments.” He described Woking’s debt, forecast to rise to almost £2.4bn by 2024/25, as “an outlier” even among the other local authorities government was working with.

He also said he had concerns about the authority’s lending arrangements for major developments, the risks council and taxpayers were exposed to due to the long-term high levels of debt and the “sensitivity of these investments to commercial performance”.



Ayesha Azad, leader of Woking Borough Council from Oct 2020, submitted by her. Credit to Ayesha Azad.

Surrey County Council announced Councillor **Ayesha Azad** (Conservative, Woking South West), who led Woking Borough Council from October 2020 to May 2022, had decided to step down from the authority’s cabinet, where she was appointed in September. The county council’s leader, **Tim Oliver** (Conservative, Weybridge), said: “I have discussed this matter with Cllr Azad and in light of her recent role in Woking and a potential conflict in the light of the support being provided by SCC, she has decided to step aside from her cabinet position while this review takes place.”

On Wednesday (October 19) the borough council had announced a “partnership approach” to fixing the authority’s finances, working with the county council and continuing to work alongside the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).

Councillor **Ann-Marie Barker** (Liberal Democrat, Goldsworth Park), the borough council’s leader, said she was pleased

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ISSN 2753-2771

the letter had recognised the “constructive and cooperative approach” taken by the authority in working with DLUHC and the county council. She added: “I welcome the support and additional advice from an independent review into the council’s finances, investments and related governance that has been offered on a non-statutory basis.”

She said since the Liberal Democrat group had taken control of the council in May, the administration had been assessing the debt, looking among other things at the rising cost of the Victoria Arch project, projecting a further £53 million in costs, and the funding of the Victoria Square development. Cllr Barker said: “It is however clear that difficult decisions will have to be made and significant financial challenges lay ahead. “My administration has taken decisive early action and is committed to ensuring that our financial position is resilient, affordable, responsible, and sustainable and I will ensure that that residents, businesses, and community partners are kept fully informed throughout the duration of this process.”

The authority’s portfolio holder for finance and economic development, Cllr **Dale Roberts** (Liberal Democrat, St Johns), said the first priority was taking “urgent preventative steps to stop the situation worsening” and said reviews would be carried out of the Thameswey and Victoria Square Woking companies.

In May’s local elections the Liberal Democrats won a majority on the council, after the Conservative group had led the council for 14 years.

The May letter, from then minister for equalities and levelling up communities, **Kemi Badenoch**, was received a week after the local elections, while Cllr Azad was still technically in position as leader. At the time Cllr Azad said that though the size of Woking’s debt was not disputed, the council was acting on a financial model accepted and encouraged by central government. Cllr Azad said at the time that of the money, £700m had gone into Victoria Place and £450m into Sheerwater which had provided between them new homes, retail and entertainment spaces, public spaces and space for NHS provision.

Cllr Oliver said in a statement: “Surrey County Council has agreed to work closely with Woking Borough Council on this review and to support them in the coming months to develop a sustainable and deliverable improvement plan. The residents of Surrey are our primary focus and, as we have demonstrated before, we will always do everything we can to help our fellow Surrey local authorities to protect the services our residents rely on.”

Chelsea supports footie expansion next-door

17 November 2022



Cobham Football Club will get major upgrades to attract more women into football after councillors gave the green light following support from Premier League giant **Chelsea**. Several other organisations showed support for plans, which include a new spectator stand and new floodlights, saying the club helps support those with disabilities and could help in bringing more women and girls to the game.

Councillors said the football club was an asset to the community in an area where a lot of facilities were privately owned, voting for the changes with only the meeting chair abstaining. A meeting of **Elmbridge Borough Council’**s planning committee approved the application from the club, which was brought to the meeting on Tuesday (October 18) for a decision because the land is owned by the authority.

Support for the new 3G artificial pitch came from **Chelsea FC**, in a letter which highlighted the Premier League club having worked in the area for many years and said it would like “first refusal” on possible future community projects. These were listed as possibly including supporting the growth of women’s football and running a development centre for 7- to 15-year-old girls as well as supporting grass roots clubs looking to get girls into competitive football.

Chelsea’s Cobham Training Centre is in nearby Stoke d’Abernon and many former players including Frank Lampard, John Terry, Petr Cech, and Eden Hazard have lived in the area.

As well as this there was support for the application from **Surrey FA, Surrey Soccer Schools, Cobham Lin**k, a day service for adults with learning disabilities and autism, and **Leatherhead Primary Care Network**, representing a group of GP practices in the area.

Councillor **Alistair Mann** (Conservative, Cobham and Downside) said he hoped the committee would get behind the application because the club was there to promote “sport for all, football for all”. He said: “The outstanding feature of Cobham Football Club is its community basis. It’s there for the community.”

Concerns raised around the application included the loss of Cypress trees at the club’s eastern edge, to be replaced with holly hedges, as well as the noise impact on neighbours of the facility. Councillor **Laurence Wells** (Liberal Democrat, Cobham and Downside) said the installation of an artificial pitch would mean more playing time available, important in making sure sport was accessible to all and particularly in an area with a lot of private facilities. He said he thought conditions on the application regarding light and noise would deal with issues as best as they could but added: “Whether a noise management plan can effectively deal with swearing at 10 o’clock at night, we will wait and see but I think it’s

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ISSN 2753-2771

covered off as best as possible.” He called for the pitch to be recycled at the end of its ten-year lifespan, saying it was equivalent to 1.5million plastic bags.
ENDS

Will Council strikes spread to Epsom and Ewell?

17 November 2022



Reigate and Banstead Borough Council staff are using food banks and claiming Universal Credit, according to union officials, as workers go out on strike. Council employees have been offered a 1.3 per cent pay rise, labelled “insulting” by the Unison union. The strike will take place over Tuesday and Wednesday (18 and 19 October) with organisers calling for a greater increase in the face of rising inflation and the cost of living crisis.

Reigate and Banstead council staff on strike. Image credit: Darren Pepe/Surrey Live

Maggie Judd, principal local land charges officer at the council, is the union’s branch manager and said it’s the first industrial action in her 20 years at the authority. She said the council should be using some of its reserves to help staff with a better pay offer and the number of staff out on strike today showed the “strength of feeling” on the issue.

Claiming some staff were having to use food banks and topping up their wages with Universal Credit, she said: “It’s just so upsetting in this day and age, in full time employment, having to use food banks. People are having to make difficult choices.”

Unison said planning officers, parking attendants, administrators, refuse workers, cleaners, and security officers were on strike, and staff on the lower pay grades at the council would receive an additional £200. Unison south east regional organiser **Jenny Mason** said: “This pay offer is nowhere near enough. Staff feel insulted. Many employees are using food banks and their wages have to be topped up with benefits. They’ve been forced to stretch their pay to make ends meet even at the best of times.”

She called on the council to make a better offer, and on the government to provide money to protect local services, saying residents would also suffer because staff would “vote with their feet and join other local councils offering better pay”.

A council spokesperson said around seven per cent of its workforce, 40 employees, were believed to be on strike, and all services continued to operate. They said the 2022/23 pay rise was in addition to cumulative increases in the previous five years from 2017/18 to 2020/21 totalling 10.13 per cent, and additional one-off payments, such as £250 paid to all staff during the covid pandemic in August 2020 and £200 paid in April during National Insurance increases and rising living costs.

Council leader Councillor **Mark Brunt** (Conservative, Hooley, Merstham and Netherne) said the council had been making plans to minimise disruption to services since strike plans were announced. He said: “I am pleased to report that services, including our bin collections, are running as normal. We are disappointed that Unison has chosen to take this course of action. We are grateful to our dedicated staff for their ongoing hard work in challenging circumstances, and at the same time very conscious of the increased cost of living that they and their families are experiencing. However, the reality is that the council only has a finite budget from which we can offer a pay award. This is a national cost of living crisis, and increased costs and inflation are impacting the council’s budgets as well as those of households.”

Emily Coady-Stemp LDRS

Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council does not have a formal recognition agreement with a trade union due to the small number of union members in relation to the whole organisation. UNISON has a seat on the staff consultative group (made up of locally elected staff representatives) which is the recognised body for consultation purposes for the Council. As there is no formal recognition agreement with any union there is no formally recognised “facility time” [paid time to undertake union duties] within the Council. EEBC website statement on transparency.

A pay award for 2022/2023 of a 3% increase for staff was approved by the Council on 15th February 2022.

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council has 8 union representatives on its payroll and therefore do have “facility” time provided.

It seems unlikely that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council will be affected by strike action despite current inflation outstripping the pay award.

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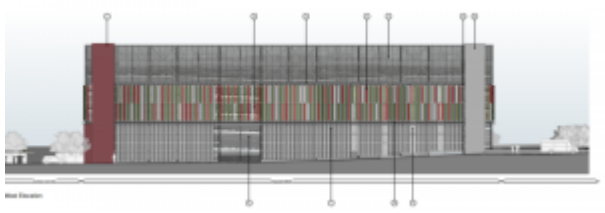
EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

26th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

Epsom Hospital's multi storey carpark wrong on many levels?

17 November 2022



A council decision to refuse a new multi-storey car park at Epsom hospital is being appealed. **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** refused an application for 600 parking spaces and changes to the Dorking Road access because of its impact on the area. An appeal by the **Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust** will be heard at the authority's town hall from November 2, and government inspectors will make a decision on the application.

Plans for the five storey car park, along with changes to surface parking and access to the site, received 125 objections and one letter in support before being refused by the borough council in May 2021.

Image: Stripe Consulting: West elevation multi-storey car park.

The multi-storey would have 527 parking spaces, with a further 104 spaces outside. Planning documents said that currently cars were backed up out of the existing car park, blocking the ambulance route in and out of the hospital but that the plans should help with this congestion. The hospital trust appealed the decision, which was made by councillors because the proposed development would adversely impact the area and affect the adjacent **Woodcote Conservation Area.**

Objections to the plans called for the car park to have some underground levels, which one nearby resident said would "minimise the horrific visual impact on the area". A resident of Dorking Road, **Mr S Curd**, called the plans "totally out of proportion for a residential area". He added: "We are so dismayed by the proposition that the house owners along our stretch of road were willing to sell our houses to the Trust so they can build a single storey car park that would actually add more spaces than this five storey monstrosity without desecrating the entire area."

The appeal will take place on November 2 from 10am.

Downs payment from EU for Epsom

17 November 2022



The Mayor of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, **Councillor Clive Woodbridge**, has officially unveiled the first phase of an exciting programme of improvements on **Epsom & Walton Dow**ns.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) secured a grant of £132,000 from the **European Agricultural Fund** for Rural Development to support the rural economy by encouraging visitors. The EAFRD grant was boosted by a further £18,000 from **The Jockey Club** and £20,000 from the **Epsom & Walton Downs Conservato**rs.

Image: Simon Durrant Jockey Club, Cllr Liz Frost (RA Woocote and Chair Epsom and Walton Downs Conservators and Mayor Clive Woodbridge unveiling
.

The improvements, which includes new benches, bins, picnic tables, waymarkers, information boards and counting posts, have been three years in the planning and began earlier this year after funding was secured.

The new infrastructure will enhance the visitor experience and allow tourists and residents to enjoy the panoramic views, discover the role of the Downs in the Borough's equestrian history and learn about the unique flora and fauna of the area. It also improves safety for both visitors and the horses by directing people away from training grounds.

The benches, bins, counting posts, picnic tables and waymarkers are now in place, and the information boards will be completed in the coming weeks. Further developments such as a brass rubbing trail are also planned for the future.

Councillor **Liz Frost**, Chair of the Epsom & Walton Downs Conservators, stated "I am delighted to see the improvements being made to this much-loved part of our Borough. We had three aims at the start of this project; to increase rural tourism; to improve safety for visitors and for both the horses and staff involved in racehorse training on the Downs; and

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ISSN 2753-2771

to educate people about the area. I think this initiative will help us to achieve those goals. I love the nods to our equestrian history on the benches and bins. The information boards will be a great asset in sharing the unique history and ecosystem of the area with visitors, and the counting posts will be able to tell the difference between walkers, cyclists and riders, so we can tailor facilities in the future. We hope that visitors to the Downs will enjoy these new resources."

Simon Durrant, General Manager at Epsom Downs Racecourse, said, "The contribution to improving the Epsom & Walton Downs is something The Jockey Club is very passionate about. The work being carried out contributes to preserving the history of the area, along with improving the experience of all visitors, be that walkers, riders or cyclists. We look forward to the continued development throughout the next phase of improvements."

While open to the public, the Downs is privately owned by The Jockey Club and managed by the Epsom & Walton Downs Conservators. Membership of the Conservators is prescribed by the Epsom & Walton Downs Regulation Act 1984, and is made up of Borough councillors, The Jockey Club and the **Betting Levy Board**.

The Council is committed to supporting the Conservators in maintaining the Downs.

The Council was able to secure the EAFRD funding before the UK becomes ineligible for such grants following Brexit.

Surrey Police tackling drug-dealers

17 November 2022



Surrey Police marked **County Lines Intensification Week** (3-9 October) by targeting and disrupting violent county lines gangs and engaging with those most vulnerable to exploitation by these criminals.

The intensification week, which is run nationally, aims to make life as difficult as possible for members of county line gangs, who often use violence and intimidation to exploit children and the vulnerable and to force them to store and 'run' drugs for them.

Over the week, officers focused on visiting local communities to raise awareness of the signs of exploitation and what to do if you think a loved one is at risk. They carried out 31 cuckooing prevention visits, safeguarded 40 vulnerable adults, engaged with over 460 people at local community events, and completed almost 120 prevention and education visits at secondary schools, taxi firms, leisure centres and youth groups.

A total of 11 people were also arrested for various drugs offences, 76 people were proactively stopped and searched, over 250 wraps of heroin and crack cocaine were seized, and more than £2000 in cash and assets were confiscated.

This latest activity was carried out by the neighbourhood and proactive teams and is on top of the 119 county lines that Centurion, our dedicated county lines team, have successfully shut down since their creation in September 2020. This works out at just over one drugs line being closed per week.

DCI Debbie White said: "County lines gangs can cause untold misery to their victims as they often utilise violence (including sexual violence), and intimidation to exploit the most vulnerable in our society. Working closely with our partners in neighbouring forces and the South East Regional Crime Unit (SEROCU), we have become very effective at using intelligence to identify and target those who may be involved in this criminal activity and bringing them to justice. Your information is vital in allowing us to keep on closing down these drug lines, so if you have any information regarding drug dealing or violent crime in your area, or you are worried that someone is being exploited, we need you to tell us. If you'd rather not speak to police, please reach out to the anonymous and fully independent charity Crimestoppers. Together we can stop the flow of drugs into our county."

Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey **Lisa Townsend** said: "Driving county lines gangs out of Surrey remains a key priority for me as your Commissioner and this kind of targeted police action is vital in helping take dangerous people and drugs off our streets. These networks are ruthless and actively groom young and vulnerable people in our communities to act as drug couriers or dealers. It is so important we all work together to prevent them falling into the clutches of these gangs. That is why I would ask everyone to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity to the police so they can take immediate action and disrupt this criminal activity in our county."

Surrey Police news

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