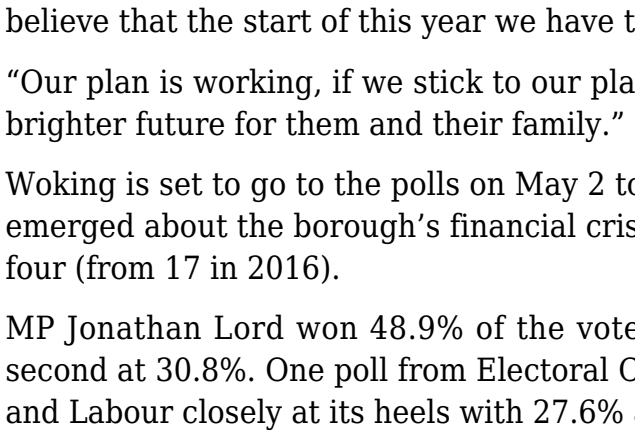
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26th November 2026

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PM confident of success in Woking

12 April 2024



Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said he was “confident” that Conservatives will hold onto Woking in the upcoming local and general elections, when he was grilled about why people should vote for a party that allowed the local council to go bankrupt.

The PM was at Woking Community Hospital April 11th where he was grilled about the fate of the Conservative party by reporters.

The PM pointed to the UK economy in response to questions about why Woking residents should vote for a party that allowed the local council to go bakrupt.

Woking Council declared bankruptcy in June 2023 after it admitted a risky investment spree into hotels and skyscrapers by its former Conservative administration.

Calling Woking’s investments a “cross-party” decision, Rishi said local councils are “in control of their own finances”, and urged they run their budgets “in a sensible manner to deliver to their residents”.

Citing the national picture, Rishi said inflation has “more than halved” to 3.4% in February 2024, wages have increased ahead of inflation, taxes have been cut and free childcare has been expanded to working families.

He added: “While we have been through a tough few years as a country, that’s been difficult for families in Surrey, I do believe that the start of this year we have turned a corner and we’re now heading in the right direction.

“Our plan is working, if we stick to our plan we can give everyone in Surrey and Woking the peace of mind that there is a brighter future for them and their family.”

Woking is set to go to the polls on May 2 to vote for a third of the council (10 seats) in the local elections. Since news first emerged about the borough’s financial crisis, his party lost control of the council, and saw its share of councillors drop to four (from 17 in 2016).

MP Jonathan Lord won 48.9% of the vote in the 2019 election, with Liberal Democrat candidate Will Forster coming second at 30.8%. One poll from Electoral Calculus predicts Jonathan will win a narrow victory of just 30.8%, with Lib Dem and Labour closely at its heels with 27.6% and 23.6% respectively.

Although the Woking MP was present during the media pool, he made no further comment.

The PM argued central government has put more funding into councils, claiming local councils have on average 7.5% more funding than 2023. A further £600m has also been put into local authorities for 2024-25.

He said: “Central government is doing its bit to support [local councils] with considerably more funding.” Despite the added funding Woking Council said it has to make £8.4m savings for year one of its five-year financial strategy. Closing most public toilets, ending grants to voluntary and community groups, reducing dial-a-ride services and losing up to 60 staff are some of the cuts the council has made to make ends meet.

Related report:

Sunak in Surrey

New born enters world by rare EXIT

12 April 2024



A 50 strong team of specialist medics crammed into an operation theatre recently to carry out a globally rare procedure on a newborn baby and save his life.

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Little Freddie Verschueren was delivered at St George's hospital in South West London using the Ex-utero Intrapartum Treatment (EXIT) procedure which delivers babies who could potentially have serious challenges at birth.

This procedure is used when an unborn child has an obstruction in their airway which means they would be unable to breathe independently once they are removed from the placenta.

Professor Asma Khalil, consultant obstetrician at St George's, led the entire operation, which involved about 50 medics and other staff in the operating theatre.

She said: "An EXIT procedure involves a large number of healthcare professionals from various backgrounds including an obstetrician, fetal medicine specialist, an anaesthetist, a paediatric anaesthetist, a paediatric ENT surgeon, midwives and the neonatal team, as well as other theatre staff."

In little Freddie's case there was a cyst on his tongue that could potentially block his airways it was detected in a scan during his mum's second trimester. The team made an incision in mum Anna's tummy and delivered Freddie's head and shoulders first, leaving him attached to the placenta and able to breathe.

They established an airway so he could breathe independently before delivering the rest of him. Freddie weighed 6lbs 8oz (3.1kg) at birth and was able to go home with his parents Anna and Peter Verschueren a healthy baby.

Anna said: "We've been incredibly impressed with the service we have had at St George's, at every step it has been outstanding care. When we found out we needed to have the procedure we felt in such safe hands with the experts at St George's. We never doubted their skill and advice."

Professor Khalil added: "I am very grateful to the efforts by every member of our large team who ensured that we delivered the best care to Anna and Freddie. Saving babies' lives and caring for the parents during challenging times is the most rewarding aspect of my job."

An EXIT procedure is extremely rare. However, despite its global rarity this is the second time it has been carried out in St George's this year.

Dr Richard Jennings, Group Chief Medical Officer for St George's, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group, said: "St George's is one of the few hospitals in the country that carries out this rare procedure and saves the lives of many babies. I am pleased to hear that Freddie is doing well thanks to our dedicated and skilled teams and everyone at St George's wishes him and his family all the best for the future."

£1.1 m boost for Surrey Uni's solar thermal research

12 April 2024



Solar-thermal devices that have the potential to transform how we heat our homes and generate power on a larger scale are being developed by a team led by the University of Surrey. This exciting project has received a £1.1 million grant from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC).

The main goal of this research is to create new designs for surfaces that can selectively absorb sunlight while also efficiently emitting heat in the form of near-infrared radiation. These devices are different from solar cells, which typically convert sunlight into electricity; solar-thermal devices use sunlight to generate heat, which can then be used for driving mechanical engines or converted into electricity.

The research project is led by Surrey, in collaboration with the University of Bristol and Northumbria University and combines their expertise in photonics, advanced materials, applied electromagnetics, and world-class nanofabrication facilities.

Professor Marian Florescu, Principal Investigator from the University of Surrey, said:

"Our project is not just about innovating; it's about responding to a global necessity. The sun showers us with a tremendous amount of energy every day, far more than we currently capture. By developing these advanced solar-absorbing surfaces, we are opening up new, efficient ways to harness this abundant solar energy. Our goal is to transform

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how we use sunlight, making it a powerhouse for clean and sustainable energy that meets our growing needs without harming the planet."

The project has several aims:

- To develop solar absorbers that can work well even at very high temperatures.
- Improve the efficiency of the team's special solar-absorbing structures. The team plans to build prototype models to demonstrate how well they work.
- To better understand and ultimately improve how these devices handle and perform with the heat they generate from sunlight.

Professor Marin Cryan, Co-Principal Investigator from the University of Bristol, said:

"The University of Bristol has been developing thermionic solar cell technology for a number of years. These use concentrated sunlight to heat materials to the point where thermionic emission of electrons occurs, which can form the basis of high-efficiency, low-cost solar cells. This exciting project will develop very efficient solar selective absorbers, which will be an important component of the overall cell design."

Dr Daniel Ho, Co-Principal Investigator from Northumbria University, said:

"Northumbria University is at the forefront of thermophotovoltaic research, utilising a specialised microscope heating stage alongside an in-house built Fourier imaging spectroscopy system. This advanced thermal analysis technique enables comprehensive and angle-resolved scattering analysis across both visible and infrared spectrums, even under vacuum conditions and at temperatures as high as 1000°C.

"We are excited to work with our partners to help achieve pioneering developments in renewable energy research."

Auto fire alarms need a 999 before fire service respond in Surrey

12 April 2024



Surrey Fire and Rescue Service has changed the way it now responds to **automatic fire alarm** call outs (AFAs) to residential and domestic properties, by only attending if there's been a 999 call to confirm there is a fire or signs of fire.

This change, introduced last month, covers AFAs at properties including hotels, boarding schools, care homes and any other residential types, including those that contain single private dwellings.

98% of the residential and domestic AFA call outs that Surrey Fire and Rescue Service attended from October 2022-March 2023 were false alarms. These accounted for 976 mobilisations – that's more than 5 fire engines a day being sent out on blue lights to false alarms where there isn't a fire.

This change is the second phase of work, after making the switch in 2022 and only attending non-sleeping business calls when a fire is confirmed. Since then, false alarm visits have decreased by over 95%.

Surrey Fire and Rescue Service would like to reassure residents that nothing is changing in their response to a real fire. Only now, the call handlers will ask a series of questions designed to determine the nature of the call and whether there is a fire, or signs of fire, and depending on the response received, crews may still attend to investigate the reason for the AFA.

Group Commander and project lead for the change, Rob Jenks said: "*We're committed to keeping our communities safe, and if there's a fire, or signs of a fire, we will always respond immediately.*

"*After successfully making the switch for business AFA call outs in 2022, this new change is another positive step for our communities. We spend many hours and resources on responding to false alarms, and now, our crews and pumps will be more readily available when there's a confirmed emergency.*"

If at any time you discover signs of fire, raise the alarm, get out using the nearest fire exit and call 999.

For residents responsible for these types of premises, the service is urging you to visit their dedicated webpage for more information and advice on how to investigate an automatic fire alarm activation, and steps you can take to make your property as safe as possible.

Please visit: **https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/community/fire-and-rescue/community-safety/automatic-fire-alarms** to find out more about how this will affect you or your property.

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Ewell’s wetlands to be celebrated on an open day

12 April 2024



The South East Rivers Trust (SERT) is inviting local residents to come and celebrate the newly-created **Chamber Mead** wetlands with a day of family fun, activities and guided tours.

The celebration day on Saturday 20th April will give nature lovers the chance to add plants to this critical pollution buster for the **River Hogsmil**l, a precious chalk stream.

Families will also have the chance to learn about the health of the river by taking part in riverfly demonstrations, a scavenger hunt and nature craft activities. Guided tours of the wetlands will also be part of the day, which runs from 11am to 3pm.

The open day begins a fortnight of planting opportunities for schools and community groups. All the plants have been specially selected to absorb pollutants and attract pollinators and an increased range of wildlife across the **Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve**.

The wetlands in **Ewell** now divert urban pollutants from the Green Lanes Stream away from the Hogsmill, one of only 200 chalk streams in the world. Once filtered water is fed back into the river just downstream of the famous Stepping Stones, another 5km of waterway is protected as it flows into south London all the way to the Thames.

Dr Bella Davies, Co-CEO of SERT, said: “We’re thrilled to be giving the community the chance to learn all about Chamber Mead wetlands and crucially give people the chance to complete the project. The public have been very supportive of the wetlands from the start and adding plants is a wonderful opportunity to attract new wildlife not only to the water but the wider nature reserve. This will fulfill the potential of the wetlands to become another jewel in the crown of the reserve and make it an even bigger asset for the community. We’re excited to see the results in years to come on the Hogsmill, which should be a haven for brown trout, water voles and native crayfish, among other species which need our help in recovering their numbers.”

Councillor **John Beckett**, (RA Auriol) Chair of the Environment Committee at **Epsom & Ewell Borough Council**, said: “We are overjoyed to be able to join SERT on the Chamber Mead Wetlands Open Day, to celebrate the fantastic work that has been done here to boost biodiversity and reduce pollution in the Hogsmill River. I hope that residents will join us to help complete the project, which will ensure the Hogsmill River Local Nature Reserve is a place where wildlife and nature can thrive, and one that we can enjoy for many years to come.”

Supported by the Hogsmill Catchment Partnership, the project has received funding from The Coca-Cola Foundation, Natural England (through the Species Recovery Programme), the Environment Agency, Surrey County Council, the Rivers Trust, the Zoological Society of London, Garfield Weston Foundation and Thames Water, with in-kind support from the landowner Epsom & Ewell Borough Council. The new wetlands are part of the wider Replenish programme in partnership with the Coca-Cola Foundation and the Rivers Trust. The aim of Replenish is to restore millions of litres of water in this and other local catchments, in turn improving biodiversity.

Speeches will take place at 11:30am- 12noon:

These will be delivered by **Jackie King**, Chief Executive of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Dr Bella Davies, Co-CEO of the South East Rivers Trust, and Borough Mayor Cllr **Robert Geleit** (Labour Court) who will also cut the ribbon to officially open the wetlands.

Plants such as yellow flag iris have been chosen for their ability to take up nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous. Meanwhile ragged robin and purple loosestrife will attract species such as butterflies, bees and damselfies, while brooklime, typical in chalk stream settings, will offer shelter for tadpoles and sticklebacks.

Related reports:

Chalking up a victory for the Hogsmill

“Garden of Eden” coming to West Ewell as Wetlands Plan is approved. Will this stop pollution?

Voles let loose on the Hogsmill

About the South East Rivers Trust:

The South East Rivers Trust is an environmental charity bringing rivers and their catchments back to

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life. Working in 12 river catchments across the South East, the Trust connects communities and mobilises citizen scientists to educate and engage people on the importance of rivers, and supports and challenges stakeholders, businesses and individuals to protect them. The Trust uses data and evidence to target positive action and works with nature to make rivers healthy again. This includes tackling water pollution, addressing water scarcity, reconnecting rivers and restoring habitats.
www.southeastriverstrust.org/

London Calling Time with a Sutton & Epsom Win

12 April 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 12 Reeds Weybridge 10. Saturday 6th April.

As is the format of league rugby the fixtures conclude by playing the opposition first encountered on the opening day of the campaign. On that September afternoon bathed in glorious sunshine but disrupted by Rugby World Cup absentees, of the carousing rather than playing variety, Reeds Weybridge gained a 27-12 success. With both teams secure in the knowledge that they had retained their Regional 2 South East status for next time one might have expected a high-scoring denouement to the campaign. In the end the teams created a Sutton & Epsom league record as the Black & Whites edged the contest 12-10 so recording the lowest aggregate ever for the last game of the season undercutting the 1995 classic when S&E won 13-11 at Ealing.

It was a red-letter day for George London as the veteran, but not balding, back row made his 200th league appearance for the 1 st XV transforming the ‘Fab Four’ into the ‘Famous Five’ of players to have reached that landmark. The match was played with the handicap, or advantage, of a howling wind arrowing towards the corner flag at the clubhouse end. Reeds Weybridge kicked off with the elements against them. At once the significance of the gale was demonstrated as Tom Lennard cleared from his 22 to the opposition 22. If that was not harsh enough it was a 50/22 and Sutton were awarded the lineout.

This initiated a ten-minute siege of the Reeds line. The throw in was secured, the forwards advanced and a penalty was indicated as a speculative ball descended from the heavens onto the wings. The defenders saved the day but returned for more punishment. The penalty was kicked to the corner, McTaggart rose skywards to gather and initiate the second assault. Three carries and a penalty and the same dose of medicine was repeated. This time the referee issued a yellow card and Sutton & Epsom pressed on against 14. A tap and go, a roar from the crowd but no try and it went wide and more optimistic overtures as Ghumra dived for the corner. Back for another penalty and the Rugby Lane crowd were beseeching Sir to indicate a try but Hegarty was held up. Reeds relief and a drop out under the posts to restart play. The Black & Whites countered with zeal and finally opened their account. Perhaps Mr Richardson had a sense of occasion as the try-scorer was George London. The conversion was added but with another dramatic twist as Freddy Bunting was allowed a second bite at the cherry and the hosts led 7-0.

The opening score was not the sign of the floodgates opening but saw the visitors getting a foothold in the game. It was obvious that Reeds were looking to play at a high tempo and get the ball to their dangerous back division. Penalties were played quickly and the RW pack was gaining the ascendancy at the scrummage. On the half hour they were rewarded with an outstanding try. The combination of superb line of running by Pete Cole and a perfectly timed pass saw winger Matt Stevenson run in under the posts with four colleagues in congratulatory support. Fullback Pete Cole added the extras to level the scores at 7-7. Moments later it took two tremendous tackles within a minute by Josh Pulvirenti to snuff out a potential break from halfway. Despite the conditions it was Reeds who were finishing the first half the stronger with centre Josh Clark to the fore using intelligent chips and grubbers to keep Sutton on the back foot. The first period ended with no further addition to the scoreboard. Reeds Weybridge had achieved the notable success of being on level terms despite playing against a very strong wind.

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The start of the second period was a mirror of the first which was hardly surprising as there was no easing up from the elements. The men from Whiteley Village dominated territory and possession but they discovered, as had their Sutton counterparts, that those final yards were the hardest. Marcus Clark on the wing came closest to breaking the deadlock but the S&E defensive line stood strong whether it was Kyren Ghumra on the wing or the tireless pack. Increasingly the flow of the game was disrupted by infringements on the deck that created a stalemate that prevented the Reeds backs demonstrating their quality and gave the Sutton & Epsom defence added confidence in what was a surprisingly uneventful third quarter.

The final twenty minutes signalled the start of increased excitement as Matt Stevenson's quickly taken penalty appeared to have caught Sutton & Epsom napping. However, a fabulous cover tackle by Captain Bunting was a most timely intervention that was improved when S&E were awarded a relieving penalty. Soon it was advantage Sutton & Epsom with Freddie Bunting making a surging break to the 22 to link with centre partner Ellis Rudder that concluded with a Sutton penalty. The resulting 5-metre attacking lineout drifted on the wind with a not straight verdict giving the visitors an escape route. Perhaps it was frustration but the visitors ignored the helpful conditions to run the ball from their own line. The yards gained were immediately lost to a penalty and petulance that saw them marched back 10 metres. Ironically Reeds next opportunity came as Sutton lost the ball in the opposition 22 and it was fly-hacked clear. Suddenly the pitch opened up with RW players streaming ominously forward but Austin Bell did wonderfully to secure the loose ball to avert disaster on halfway.

With the game in the balance and in time added on Reeds were within touching distance of glory but had the consolation of a penalty. It was an easy decision for captain Herbie Finn to opt for the kick at goal as fullback Pete Cole effortlessly put the visitors 10-7 up. One could imagine Captain Finn imploring his team to secure the restart and send it deep into Sutton territory and on no account concede a penalty. With the billowing breeze making the restart more of a lottery than it might have been the Black & Whites were given the lifeline of a penalty. It was advanced to the corner and another penalty followed the lineout. Sutton went for route one as tempers boiled over before the final play of the season. The forwards provide a mass of steaming humanity on the try-line and Rob Hegarty squeezed over to win the game for Sutton & Epsom. It was left for George London to attempt the touchline conversion and despite a passable impression of All Black legend Don Clarke it fell short. The final whistle blew and Sutton & Epsom had snatched victory by 12-10. The supporters retired to the clubhouse and for those who live in a tinkerless world they ruminated on what might have been in 2023-4. The Sutton & Epsom victory was synonymous with the man of the hour, George London, it was full of determination, a never say die attitude and a will to win in adversity that saw Sutton over the line. Reeds had the edge in the scrummage and the more threatening back division. However, the powerful wind did not bring the anticipated cascade of points as both XVs demonstrated determined defence and it was the Black & Whites who gained the points by virtue of winning the try battle by 2-1 but only at the eleventh hour with Brunnhilde on her final chorus.

Sutton & Epsom
O'Brien, Findlay, Rudder, Bunting ©, Ghumra, Lennard, Munford, Boaden, Farrell, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, London, Pulvirenti & Hegarty.
Replacements: Al Khaldi, Jones & Bell.

Reeds Weybridge
Cole, Stevenson, J. Clark, Maddock, Brown, Jesty, Palmer, L. Day, R. Day, Ring, Finn ©, Wasko, G. Corner, Collyer, A. Corner.
Replacements: Rawding, Relfe & M. Clark.

Image courtesy Robin Kennedy

Surrey Councils holding unclaimed tax refunds

12 April 2024

Council	Value of refunds owed	Number of accounts owed
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council	Failed to share the requested data	
Elmbridge Borough Council	Failed to share the requested data	
Tandridge District Council	Failed to share the requested data	
Guildford Borough Council (rolling)	£323,769.96	1,095
Spelthorne Borough Council	£307,273.08	1,245
Mole Valley District Council	£249,459.01	802
Reigate & Banstead Borough Council	£218,883.91	765
Waverley Borough Council	£157,452.49	566
Woking Borough Council	£148,046.16	566
Surrey Heath Borough Council	£83,060.34	293
Runnymede Borough Council	£5,777.17	4

Councils in Surrey are holding nearly £1.5million in overpaid tax that can be claimed back. People who moved to a different borough after paying their tax are supposed to be sent a closing bill. If an account is in credit, overpayments are refunded.

When this is not possible, for example if the council does not have a resident's forwarding address, the overpaid cash can sit in a pot until a claim is made – or the residents return to the borough.

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In Surrey, that figure is a combined £1,493,722.12 for eight of the 11 councils. As for the others (Elmbridge, Tandridge and **Epsom and Ewell**) their figures remain unclear.

The three most common reasons for overpayments are when someone moves out of their house and has already paid, changes to a property's tax band, or when residents forget to cancel standing orders when they move.

The two biggest stockpiles are held by Guildford and Spelthorne Borough Councils, and account for more than £600,000. This is according to data released under Freedom on Information to Money Saving Expert.

Tax not claimed back can be written off by a council – to balance the cost of bad debts – however Guildford Borough Council said it reinstates the money if a resident comes forward to claim the credit.

Guildford Borough Council told the Local Reporting Democracy Service it has refunded 12,793 people on both closed and open accounts with a total value of £4.4 million, since April 2021. It says nearly a third of these were refunded through MyGuildford online accounts.

A spokesperson for Guildford Borough Council said: "It's important that we are provided with a forwarding address so we can send closing bills or retrospective bill changes.

"If a refund is not claimed, the money will remain on the account until the resident claims it or becomes liable for council tax in our borough again." They added: "To be transparent, we roll over overpaid council tax every year. If other councils have already written off credits, their credit value will be reduced."

Guildford council added that they don't have a specific deadline for claiming overpaid council tax. But to avoid fraudulent claims, they ask residents to provide proof of the overpayment. The older the claim, the more proof is needed.

A spokesperson for Spelthorne Borough Council said: "Tax refunds occur for a number of reasons, for example if a resident has moved from the borough or they have paid a bill in advance and Spelthorne Borough Council proactively issues any council tax refunds which are due.

"Where accounts are in credits, statements are sent with refund application to the last known address, if we hold bank details refunds are refunded directly back to the bank account that they were paid from. Where accounts are constantly paying in credit, copy bills are sent to prompt a response from the payer to claim the overpayment back.

"Residents can keep track of their council tax bill by registering for the self-service customer portal online or call the team on 01784 451499."

Elmbridge Borough Council, which did not respond to the FOI, said it refunds overpaid council tax if a resident's account is in credit and does not owe any other amounts of tax.

People who move within the borough will usually have credits from their previous address transferred across, while those leaving the area can arrange a refund.

[Nationwide the London Borough of Newham holds the highest of £9,539,750 and Surrey's Runnymede fourth lowest of £5,777.]

Contact your local authority for specific advice on claiming it back, as this is likely to differ.

Virtual care to rise under ambulance plan

12 April 2024



Over a third of South East Coast Ambulance (SECAmb) service responses will be done remotely in a new five-year strategy. (Here "remotely" means by video call or telephone rather than sending out an ambulance.)

The NHS Trust said its care model is no longer "fit for purpose" as it prepares for a 15 per cent increase in patient demand over the next five years, at a board meeting last week (April 4). Increasing demands on the service included health care becoming more complex, the ageing population and changing areas of deprivation.

By 2029, the Trust aims that over a third of all its patients will be signposted to another service- leaving 65 per cent of patients with an ambulance response. The change will affect Surrey, Thames Valley, Kent and Medway as well as Sussex Integrated Care Systems (ICS).

Simon Weldon, CEO, reassured that SECAmb would still be there to protect and look after the sick who needed an ambulance. He added: "If patients don't need an ambulance, we can help you get you to a place which can meet your healthcare needs."

Urgent medical needs such as cardiac arrest, a stroke, heart attack, pneumonia, childbirth and newborn care would still be attended to by ambulances, the Trust said.

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Delivering this strategy, over the next three years, SECAmb expects it to meet emergency care needs within the national standards of 7 minutes for calls for immediate life-threatening and time-critical injuries and illnesses; and 18 minutes for emergency calls.

For non-emergency patients, virtual care will be provided via an assessment by a remote senior clinician. Meeting documents said this would enable patients to be “cared for directly or referred to the most appropriate care provider”.

Investing in a data and digital strategy was highlighted as a key part of the new direction. The board heard how new technology like AI would help the SECAmb make better decisions and lead virtual consultations. These could be used to respond to patient needs in a remote and professional setting rather than sending an ambulance.

Meeting documents revealed that 88 per cent of patients received an ambulance response; but an SECAmb officer said the outcomes from the cases indicated only 30.5 per cent of patients needed clinical care.

Only 12 per cent of patients are currently referred or signposted to another service rather than receiving ambulance care; but under the new strategy for 2029, this will increase to 35 per cent.

Team Member for SEAmb, Matt Dechaine, said: “Sending a fully kitted ambulance is a very expensive way for the public purse to respond to patient needs, when other services may be able to address it in a cost-effective way.”

Covering five years, the new strategy will be carried out in three phases: designing new models of care, collaborating with partners and developing a digital strategy; implementing the change and finalising and improving the operational model. Digitalisation of the service will begin in phase 2, with electronic health records deployed by March 2025.

SEAamb identified its model as “unsustainable when challenged” from an operational, workforce and financial perspective. The Trust found it would need to employ 600 more people over the next five years to respond to demand.

Not all non-emergency patient consultations will be resolved solely over the telephone. Simon told the board that the strategy aims to “align patient needs with ambulance services”.

Over 2,000 staff, 400 volunteers and 350 members of the public have been consulted on the strategy, with the Trust saying it has been “clinically led”. System partners have also been invited to 20 sessions to share their views.

The full new SECAmb strategy is set to be published in May 2024.

Call staff at South East Coast Ambulance NHS Foundation Trust. Credit SECAmb

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Floods with silver linings for Guildford’s housing targets?

12 April 2024



Guildford has been given the “biggest opportunity” to transform itself in a century. The Environment Agency is looking into an expanded flood prevention scheme that would save homes and businesses from rising waters – and open up previously unusable town-centre land for new housing. Supporters say the upshot of this is huge.

Councils have to identify land for housing in order to meet Government set targets, but Guildford Borough Council had to recently disregard 50 sites because they were subject to flooding – 30 of which were in the town centre, the Local Democracy Reporting Service was told.

If the expanded flood alleviation scheme goes ahead it would instantly increase the amount of land in the town and in a swoop take pressure off green belt villages.

Former councillor John Rigg said that the town has been waiting affected by floods for almost 100 years and that it would only get worse if nothing was done. He said: “The Environment Agency’s planning period anticipates a 72 per cent increase in rainfall in the Guildford area. Not steady rain, big downpours.”

He said the problem was compounded as towns upstream – for example in Waverley – pressed on with their own developments.

Mr Rigg said: “When the Government said Guildford had to deliver 10,000 homes, they had to all go in the green belt and the villages, because nobody got the flooding scheme underway and released the brownfield sites. When Guildford was looking at land for development as part of its local plan, there were 50 sites that had to be disregarded because they were subject to flooding, 30 of them in the town centre.”

Among those are the Millmead and Millbrook car parks.

He said: “We have got to get the flood alleviation plan adopted. The EA has said there is £7bn allocated to areas that

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deliver economics and social benefits. This ticks all the boxes. It's an important town, it's a county town and it needs homes and businesses. The previous scheme was a minimum, just to stop a couple of streets flooding, but this does it properly, it frees up brownfield sites. It's the biggest opportunity for Guildford since about 1900. Last week, by the cinema it flooded, it was up to people's knees, as far as this town is concerned, they need to wake up."

Guildford has a long history of flooding from the River Wey, and the Environment Agency, working with the borough council and Surrey County Council, are looking to reduce the high level of flood risk to the town centre.

The project is still in its appraisal stage, but the EA has confirmed it is looking to create a larger protection zone than initial plans from 2018. It expects to take up to three years to finalise the scheme as it undertakes assessments, surveys and public engagement – the first of which takes place at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre on Thursday April 18, from 2pm to 7pm.

Jon Mansbridge, Guildford Flood Alleviation Scheme project director at the Environment Agency, said: "The feedback we gather from communities during our engagement is really valuable in helping to inform the preferred option." He added: "The flood defences will be visually integrated into existing and regenerated areas of the river corridor, reducing flood risk to even more of the town centre."

Councillor Joss Bigmore, former co-leader of Guildford Borough Council said: "Finally the Environment Agency is supporting the council by backing a flood alleviation scheme. "We've been patient, nobody has the money to do these things, and its positive that we are at the top of the queue.

"Hopefully we can come up with a comprehensive solution and hopefully we can eradicate the risk of flooding for the centre of Guildford for the next century." He added: "For existing residents it very important – and if there is a solution it will unlock a lot of regeneration opportunities on former flood risk areas."

Flooding in Guildford Feb 2020 (image Environment Agency)

Big employment hub coming to Leatherhead

12 April 2024



The future of a possibly major employment hub in Leatherhead has been given a huge "vote of confidence".

Four new buildings and 13 industrial warehouse units will be built in the north of the town after decision-makers backed plans to modernise part of the Cleeve Road Business Park Research Area.

Three "rather tired" buildings, Alpha, Beta, and Cetec, will be torn down to make way for modern facilities that meet the "expectations of employers and businesses today".

The decision, backed unanimously at the Wednesday, April 3 meeting of Mole Valley's Development Committee, had widespread support within the room given the area was already earmarked as a business park by the borough's planners.

Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (LD, Leatherhead North) said: "I am broadly in favour of this.

"I think it is a sort of vote of confidence in the industrial unit there, and the site, and the future of it, which is a really good thing.

"I'm pleased to see investment being put into that area."

Cllr Chris Hunt (Ind, Ashtead Lanes & Common) said: "I really think this application is good.

"I love the mix in the size of the units, I think that appeals to firms throughout."

He said the noise, lighting and access were all positive and added: " It's the right site at the right time."

Among the comments received during the planning process were concerns over the loss of existing pedestrian and cycle access.

Councillors did urge the developers Stefania Chancerygate (Leatherhead No. 1) Limited, to keep these throughways, particularly for those who work at the site as they would benefit from easy routes into town – but were told it was not a planning matter.

The meeting heard the site had good access to the M25 and that "strategically" this was where the council would direct this type of development "as it would boost employment and promote growth".

The new plans include 112 parking bays, of which at least 50 per cent must have fast-charge sockets before any of the units are allowed to open for trading.

Cllr Phil Hammond (LD, Fetcham): "The employment land strategically for the district is really important and this is a big area but it's got rather tired and it's not really meeting the expectations of employers and businesses today.

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“It needs upgrading, it’s important employment, we need that in north Leatherhead and we need that in the north of the district.”

Image: Leatherhead Business Park (Mole Valley Planning Portal)

Taking a ride on Epsom’s new S2 bus

12 April 2024



More than most in the capital, South Londoners notice when the bus timetables change. Whether this stems from a love of the iconic red fleet or an over-reliance on the service due to a lack of London Underground coverage is besides the point.

Therefore, news of Transport for London’s (TfL) latest bus rejig last month did not go unnoticed. The changes affecting the capital’s most southerly boroughs have seen routes withdrawn and re-drawn.

Perhaps the most exciting changes have come in the form of the entirely new 439 and S2 routes, that would take South Londoners across Sutton, Merton, and Croydon in a fleet of brand-new EV buses.

Last month I took a long and winding ride on the 439, which was comfortable but eerily quiet. Now I decided to jump on South London’s other newcomer, the S2. The S2, introduced on March 2, has replaced sections of the old 470 and S4 route that took passengers between **Epsom town centre** and St Helier station. The route is operated by Go Ahead.

Getting a measure of what a bus service is actually like is hard, as there are so many variables that can influence the length and enjoyment of the journey. That said, I thought it best to take a ride mid-afternoon to get a taste of the post-lunch slump and rush hour mania.

While waiting outside my local **Ewell East** bus stop on an overcast Monday afternoon, I felt a pang of nostalgia for the former 470 service. While slow and clunky, the old route served me well during my school days.

However, this nostalgia quickly evaporated as the souped-up S2 came into view. The bright LED numbering and hum that come with all-electric vehicles suggested TfL was taking bus travel seriously in South London.

Once onboard you are met with a range of features designed to keep passengers occupied during their journey. The charging points (currently working) and display telling you how far you are from your destination are mod cons we will soon come to expect from all buses in London.

As with all new services, teething problems are common. Despite some press and handy diagrams displaying the new changes, some passengers remained confused by the change. Elderly passenger Sharon, on her ‘potter round the shops’ in Sutton, told me: “It’s the first time I’ve been on it. They’ve messed it all up, I don’t know where it goes now.”

I saw this confusion unfold later on in my journey as several passengers stood by the doors of the bus, waiting for what they thought was their stop only to find out the new stop was a further 200m up the road. One disgruntled passenger mumbled: “I’ve got to go all the way back on myself now.”

However, she admitted that she had seen news of the changes online. Moreover, she welcomed the increased frequency of the new service. She said: “They’re more frequent than the 470 though, which is good. If you missed it you thought, ‘oh god I have to wait half an hour’.”

Fellow passenger David agreed, saying: “I’ve seen these new buses fly past much more often than the ones before. It makes a change.” The route is largely residential, choosing to link up Sutton and North East Surrey’s stations via a network of sleepy treeline avenues rather than on the more hectic dual carriageways.

The salubrious route, plus the relative quiet of the electric engine, can make for a pleasant journey. Whilst gliding through Cheam’s affluent Sandy Lane, Sharon turns and says: “I like this bit, nice houses round here.”

However, as the service passes through Sutton town centre it becomes apparent that this is not the service for those in a hurry. While temporary traffic lights and the mid-journey driver change did their best to obstruct the service, the S2 route is far from direct.

The bus slows to a snail’s pace as it passes the decaying white edifice of the St Helier Hospital. Being a popular stop for visitors and medical professionals, most passengers alight at this point.

The one remaining passenger then begins to loudly cite the entire phonetic alphabet during a phone call to what sounded like a party planner. While this did provide some entertainment, the stuttered progress of the S2 meant I started to tire of her recital by the time she got to echo.

The next stage in the journey provided no relief as the bus passed through a location feared by learner drivers across Sutton and Merton. The dreaded four-lane Rose Hill roundabout.

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After nearly an hour on the S2, the bus rolls up St Helier station ending the first leg of my journey. By this time the bus is empty save for me and the driver, which seems apt for the equally deserted St Helier.

Before starting on the return leg to Epsom, I ask the bus driver for his thoughts on the new service. He said the service is based out of the Sutton bus garage and is pretty easy-going compared to other routes.

He added: “It’s not been busy in general, to be honest. The buses are nice and smooth.”

During the journey back towards Epsom, you realise the journey’s most odious section comes when you pass through The Wrythe and its network of hilly residential roads. Things get a bit more straightforward once the bus passes through Cheam.

After leaving the bus on Epsom High Street, you are immediately struck by how busy Epsom’s main thoroughfare can be during rush hour. Its main road is teeming with school children hanging outside vape shops and weary late-afternoon shoppers trying to get in before closing time.

While the S2 is a pretty comprehensive route, taking in useful stations and popular shopping locations, it seems amiss to not extend the route that little bit further up to Epsom Hospital.

Surely a route joining Epsom Hospital with St Helier, which are joint in an NHS trust, would make sense for staff and visitors. While other services serve Epsom Hospital, it wouldn’t take much effort to extend the route.

Despite this, the S2 delivers on the whole. It gets you from A to B in comfort, and the increased frequency benefits those who relied on the previous service. Just don’t be fooled by its spruced-up appearance, it’s not taking you anywhere fast.

Related reports:

New Bus Route for S2 through the Borough

Image : Harrison Galliven on the S2• Credit the author.

Tree felling foul of the law

12 April 2024



The culprits who illegally chopped down more than 100 protected trees and damaged seven others have been fined nearly £20,000, Woking Borough Council said.

A landowner, together with its contractor were prosecuted and fined for the unauthorised felling of the trees near Upshot Lane, Pyrford, after pleading guilty at Guildford Magistrates’ Court.

Burhill Development Ltd admitted it ignored a tree preservation order on its land and was made to pay £15,140, comprising fines of £11,000, a victim surcharge of £2,000 and costs of £2,140.

Their contractor, P&A Services, which carried out the work, also pleaded guilty to the unauthorised felling and causing damage to the protected trees and was ordered to pay a total of £2,900; fines of £1,000; a victim surcharge of £400; and council costs of £1,500.

The action was taken against the two firms by Woking Borough Council. The original hearing took place in October 2023 with the judge issuing sentence in March 2024.

Speaking about the prosecution, Beverley Kuchar, Woking Borough Council’s strategic director for place, described it as an “important case” and welcomed the decision.

She said: “Whether you permit or cause wilful damage to our environment we will take legal action wherever necessary.

“It is important that landowners and their contractors take the necessary steps to understand what consent is required before commencing tree works.

“The status of the borough’s trees can be checked quickly and simply online. If in doubt, our arboricultural team can provide advice in advance of any works commencing.

“There is no excuse and, as in this case, failure to do so can lead to a criminal prosecution and significant fines.”

Tree Preservation Orders protect specific trees, groups of trees, or woodland that benefit the wider community

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Psychiatric bed shortages in Surrey

12 April 2024



A man tragically took his own life in Surrey after a mental health relapse, prompting a coroner to warn of a shortage of psychiatric beds in Surrey hospitals.

Jonathan Harris, 52, who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, died by suicide on June 27, 2022.

If an inpatient psychiatric hospital bed had been available just days earlier, Jonathan would not have died, the coroner ruled. Coroner Anna Crawford judged that action should be taken to prevent future deaths.

Bed shortages for mental health patients in Surrey, as well as nationwide, has been an ongoing issue for NHS Trusts. Many patients are forced to move up to 60 miles away from home to receive treatment because there are few beds in their area. The court heard that this is in the context of a national shortage of suitably qualified psychiatrists.

Following a lengthy psychiatric inpatient stay in Camberley in November 2021, Jonathan was under the care of Surrey Heath Community Mental Health Recovery Service, which is part of Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

Jonathan was prescribed anti-psychotic medication. In February and May 2022, Jonathan requested for his medication to be reduced to fortnightly and then once every three weeks.

The reduction in medication in May 2022 was judged as “premature” by the coroner. Jonathan had reportedly shown signs of appearing “suspicious” when he was seen by the Surrey Heath Mental Health Team (MHT) on May 4. However, these signs were not explored.

The mental health team were also aware Mr Harris was moving house, meaning and move to a new community mental health team, which may affect his wellbeing.

Jonathan’s mental health continued to deteriorate and on June 24 it the MHT decided that he required an assessment under the Mental Health Act.

No inpatient bed was available and therefore the assessment did not take place. If Jonathan had been assessed, he would have been detained under the Mental Health Act and admitted to hospital.

The coroner said: “Mr Harris would not have taken his own life had he remained well and the relapse of his paranoid schizophrenia materially contributed to his death.

“Mr Harris would not have died had an inpatient psychiatric hospital bed been available on either 24, 25 or 26 June 2022.

“The court also heard that there is an ongoing shortage of available inpatient psychiatric beds in Surrey and that this is in the context of a national shortage of inpatient psychiatric beds. The court is concerned that both of these matters present a risk of future deaths.”

The Prevention of Future Deaths report was issued to NHS England rather than to Surrey and Borders Partnership. NHS England was invited to comment; it said it is working to the coroner’s deadline of 56 days to respond with the action it will take or proposed to take, and such information is not yet available.

Related reports:

Coroner catalogues care failures in diabetic death

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New Chief Executive for County

12 April 2024



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Surrey County Council has appointed **Terence Herbert** as its new Chief Executive.

Terence, currently Chief Executive at Wiltshire Council, was chosen after a robust recruitment process to find a replacement for **Joanna Killian**.

Subject to formal ratification at an extraordinary Full Council meeting on 9 April 2024, Terence is expected to take over as Chief Executive in the summer.

Leader of Surrey County Council **Tim Oliver** said:*"Terence is an outstanding leader bringing over 25 years of local government experience to the role, and it is excellent news that he will be joining us.*

"Under his leadership, Wiltshire is regarded as a strong local authority – one of the largest unitary authorities in the country – with sound finances and a high-performing workforce.

"I am certain that he will be a tremendous asset to Surrey and is the right person to lead us as we face the challenges ahead."

Terence said:*"I am delighted to have been appointed as the Chief Executive of Surrey County Council. I'm looking forward to working with the leader, Members, staff and our partners to build on Surrey's significant track record and lead the organisation through the next stage of its transformation in what continues to be a challenging time for local government.*

"Having spent much of my earlier career in children's services and mental health, I am passionate about delivering quality services for the most vulnerable residents across our communities. I know the importance of retaining a motivated and ambitious workforce with a focus on celebrating the success of our staff, so this is an area that will be a key priority for me."

Terence joined Wiltshire Council in 2011, where he was appointed Chief Executive in June 2020. Prior to this he held a number of senior leadership roles including Head of Service for Safeguarding, Associate Director for Children's Services, Executive Director for Children & Families, Leisure & Communities, Corporate Services and HR & Organisational Development, and Chief Executive Officer for People.

Terence began his career as a Registered Mental Nurse (RMN) and then qualified as a social worker, taking up posts in children's services at the London Borough of Lewisham, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and North Somerset Council.

Related reports:

Surrey chief moves on after 6 years

County CEO's pay rise triggering strikes?

Enforcing planning enforcement in Epsom and Ewell

12 April 2024



In a comprehensive analysis of the **Epsom & Ewell Borough Council**'s planning enforcement procedures, a recent audit report titled "EPSOM & EWELL BOROUGH COUNCIL INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT 2023-24," conducted by the Southern Internal Audit Partnership in February 2024, has brought to light a litany of deficiencies and failures. These findings, detailed in a thorough examination of the council's practices, underscore significant shortcomings in record-keeping, response times to complaints, and the enforcement of regulatory measures.

Central to the audit's findings is the examination of the administration of planning enforcement, a critical function entrusted with ensuring the adherence of development activities to established regulatory frameworks. Despite assertions by the council regarding the existence of a comprehensive Local Enforcement Plan, purportedly designed to outline clear guidelines and timelines for enforcement actions, the reality paints a starkly contrasting picture upon closer scrutiny.

"Testing of a sample of cases revealed a disconcerting trend of non-compliance with stipulated timelines," the report notes. Contrary to the Local Enforcement Plan's mandate of acknowledging receipt of planning enforcement complaints within five working days, numerous instances were found where this requirement was not met, resulting in prolonged delays and a lack of clarity for complainants.

Moreover, deficiencies in the triage process, a critical step in determining the priority level of enforcement cases, were exposed. Despite the plan's directive to assign priority levels ranging from one to three, the absence of mechanisms within the council's system to accurately record these priorities severely hampered monitoring efforts. As a result, the

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council's ability to effectively manage and expedite enforcement actions was compromised, leading to further delays and inefficiencies.

"Key documentation associated with enforcement actions was found to be missing altogether," the audit report reveals, casting serious doubts on the thoroughness of investigations and the efficacy of enforcement measures. In several instances where enforcement notices were issued, no evidence of follow-up actions to ensure compliance was found, directly contravening statutory requirements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

The repercussions of these systemic failures extend beyond procedural lapses to tangible impacts on the community and the council's reputation. So heard a meeting of the Council's **Audit and Scrutiny Committee** Thursday 28th March. Councillor **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley), drawing from her extensive experience in planning, expressed profound dismay at the council's failure to uphold its responsibilities in enforcing planning regulations. "I am totally surprised that we haven't dealt with this in a more timely fashion," she remarked. "This reflects poorly on our council, and I am deeply concerned about the potential consequences of unchecked development activities."

Echoing these sentiments, Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) highlighted the significance of planning enforcement to residents, citing recurring issues and delays in addressing enforcement matters. "For many residents, planning enforcement is a top priority," he emphasized. "The council's failure to act swiftly in response to complaints undermines public confidence and raises serious questions about its commitment to upholding regulatory standards."

In response to queries raised by councillors, council officers sought to clarify the circumstances surrounding the appointment of a permanent Enforcement Officer. While acknowledging the existence of temporary officers in the past, they emphasized the recent transition to a permanent role as a step towards addressing staffing concerns within the planning department.

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