EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
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Would you want to live in Woking?

A Surrey Borough Council steeped in debt: In 2022 the Liberal Democrats seized control of Woking, inheriting a debt mountain after 14 years of Conservative Party control. At the annual budget meeting of the Full Council of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 14th February the debts of Croydon Council were cited when Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley Ward) asked "Who wants to live in Croydon?" In Croydon in 2022 the Conservatives won the Mayoral election and the Council is now evenly split between Labour and Conservative representation, after years of Labour majority rule when Croydon's £1.3 billion debt grew. In contrast the Residents Association Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has been consistently "balancing the books".

The woes of Woking are reported by our BBC LDRS reporter.

Annual servicing of Woking Borough Council's massive £2billion debt is set to hit an unsustainable £62million a year, according to its own budget forecasts. The figures were published ahead of its full meeting on Thursday, February 24, where members are expected to sign off a council tax increase of 2.99 per cent.

The financial crisis at the local authority is such that the borough's leader said the council needed government support following years of failed borrowing plans under the previous administration.

According to budget papers the council borrowed about £1.8bn for investment purposes but is only bringing in £38.5m – rising to £43.3m next year, far below the £62m in annual interest payments – leaving the council in a financial black hole and under investigation by the Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities (DLUHC).

DLUHC has confirmed that no immediate decision is pending, while borough leader Councillor Will Forster thinks the government is unlikely to put the council in special measures, given the recent changes both in its senior officers and political make up.

DLUHC's report into the council's finances, investments and related governance will be made available on the government's website. Councils can not go bankrupt. Instead, they enter what is known as being under section 114 notice and means they cannot make new spending commitments. They can also lose control of their day to day running,

That does not mean Cllr Forster thinks the council can get out of its mess without help. He said: "We are still waiting for a report from the government inspection team which we will check for accuracy and information and it's too early to predict what it will find. However, Woking needs government support, there's not a problem with decision making and we have full faith in the officers. But the council can't afford to pay off its debt, not even even service the debt. The papers are quite stark. £60 million a year just to service the debt -repaying the debt is even more. We need help."

Cllr Forster said the council would be in section 114 by the 2024/25 financial year, "at this point I can not see how it can make a sustainable budget, which is terrifying," he said.

As a comparison, Surrey County Council's capital borrowing requirement is about £2.4billion. By 2026/27 Woking Borough Council is expected to reach the same level. The difference is that Surrey has an annual budget of about £2 billion, while Woking Council's is closer to £55 million.

To put it another way, Woking has the equivalent of a £2m mortgage, on an annual salary of £10,000.

Related report

Epsom and Ewell Council raises tax 2.99%

Depot Road plans

This is the third of nine reports on the BIG PLANS for Epsom and Ewell proposed in the **DRAFT LOCAL PLAN** that is out for public consultation till 17th March. We do not intend to state any support or opposition but may ask some questions.

Depot Road and Upper High Street

In a somewhat short description provided the plan is for residential development, comprising:

- At least 100 new homes

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- The reprovision of public parking by the provision of a decked car park including 1x basement level and 4x above ground levels on Depot Road.
- New access road
- Building heights ranging between 2 and 4 storeys

And the reasons given are there is an opportunity to make more efficient use of well-located town centre land by re-providing car parking in a decked structure, releasing land for new homes.

Its successful regeneration will attract new residents and businesses to the town centre.

When will the site be developed?

It is expected that a planning application will be submitted for the comprehensive redevelopment of the main site in the early part of the plan period with development likely to start by 2027.

Possible obstacles include:

- The site lies adjacent to Church Street and Epsom Town Centre Conservation Areas. It is also in the vicinity of several listed buildings. Therefore, sympathetic design is required.
- Some of the trees within and very near site are protected by Tree Preservation Orders.
- The site is within an Area of High Archaeological potential.
- Potential to improve pedestrian and cycle connectivity including from the site to the town centre.
- Any development proposal will need to incorporate mitigation relating to surface water flooding for those parts of the site that are susceptible.

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- Saturday 25 February 11:00 – 16:00, Ashley Centre, Central Square
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Related reports:

The BIG plans for Epsom and Ewell – reports on Hook Road Car Park and SGN site plan.

The Epsom and Ewell Town Hall plan

A new Town Hall for Epsom and Ewell?

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Draft Local Plan. Details how to submit your views.

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Pays to get your Council’s audit done

As we reported here: Epsom and Ewell Council raises tax 2.99% Epsom and Ewell Borough Council was proud of the fact its auditors passed its last set of accounts without any qualification. Another Borough Council of Surrey is not having such a happy time over audits. Our BBC LDRS reporter reports:

Surrey Heath councillors want Michael Gove to sack the Government appointed investigating the local authority’s finances. A motion has been put forward by Councillor Robin Perry, portfolio holder for finance, to let the local authority appoint a different firm of inspectors with the “capacity and capability to complete the outstanding audit of accounts”.

It will be discussed at Full Council on Thursday, February 23, as part of Surrey Heath’s budget meeting – where council tax is also expected to rise by 2.99 per cent. The motion comes as the council’s accounts from 2019/20 to present have yet to be signed off and approved.

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According to the tabled motion, the problems stem from “much publicised pressures across the whole local government audit system that are the result of staffing and capacity issues within those audit firms” and as such “many councils like Surrey Heath are experiencing significant delays in the completion of the audits on their accounts”. Cllr Perry says this “falsely and unnecessarily undermines confidence in the finances of all those councils, including Surrey Heath.”

Auditors were appointed in 2020 through the Public Sector Audits Appointments but the 2019/2020 accounts have still to be completed. Audit work has not even begun on any of the council’s later accounts. This, the motion says, has impacted preparation of the 2021/22 accounts and has “incurred significant expenditure retaining temporary staff with the historic knowledge and experience required to respond to queries relevant to the outstanding annual accounts”.

However, Councillor Rodney Bates, Labour opposition member for Old Dean, said it was just a “desperate attempt” by the Conservative-run council to blame “others for their own financial failures.” He said: “The main reasons why our external auditors have taken longer than expected to complete the 2019/20 accounts is because they were left in a dreadful mess after the council’s speculative property investments needed updated valuations. In addition, we have had repeated financial governance issues where the council made very large payments outside their own regulations . The external auditor is also hardly to blame for the fact that many of the Council financial files from that time were surprisingly deleted or for the poor handover records when key finance staff left. It is frankly ridiculous for the Conservative Portfolio Holder for Finance to complain about the auditors when it was his own Government that appointed them in a contract less than three years ago.

“Whilst there are customer service questions for our external auditor to answer, these are best addressed through the non-political audit committee at the council. This receives regular reports on the progress of the audits from both our officers and from our external auditor. The committee has a Conservative, Cllr Ratiram, as the vice chair and it is therefore surprising that Cllr Perry seems to have such a lack of confidence in his own colleague to address this issue.”

Should the council vote in favour of the recommended tax increase, bills for average band d home in the borough would rise from £2,155.62 per year to £2226.30, a jump of £70.68.

This figure, the papers say, includes the county council and Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner increases, but not the parish councils.

Related reports

Epsom and Ewell Council raises tax 2.99%

The Epsom and Ewell Town Hall plan

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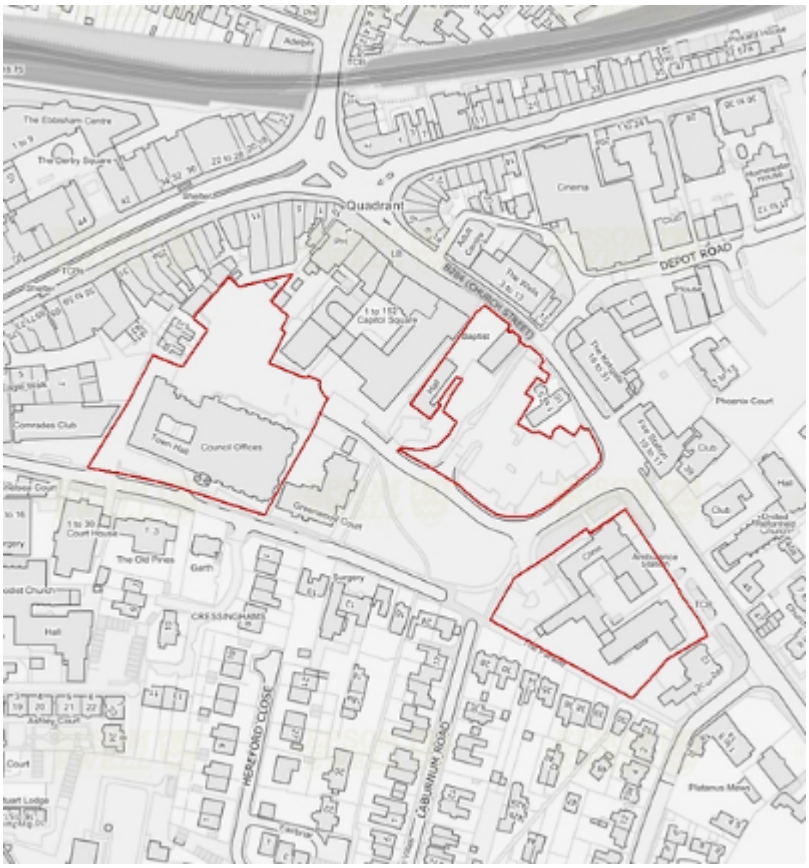

Town Hall , Hope Lodge & Epsom Clinic

The Town Hall and Hope Lodge Car Park is owned by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and is being promoted for development. The Epsom Clinic and parking lot to the rear is owned and being promoted for development by NHS Property Services, while the former Epsom Police Station and Ambulance Station is under private ownership

The plan is for a residential development, comprising:

- A new residential area focussed around Dulshot Green
- At least 90 new homes
- The total redevelopment of Town Hall, Hope Lodge Car Park and Epsom Clinic
- Building heights ranging between 2 and 4 storeys
- The reprovision of some public parking on the Town Hall site

The reasons given are that the sites provide the opportunity of making a more efficient use of land in a highly sustainable location that is currently underutilised. Its successful regeneration will attract new residents and businesses to the town centre.

When will the site be developed?

It expected that the redevelopment of the area will involve several planning applications based on a comprehensive scheme for the whole area. Planning applications are likely to be submitted early in the plan period with development likely to start by 2028.

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Local Plan battle heating up? and other related reports.

The BIG plans for Epsom and Ewell

Starting today and the next EIGHT days **The Epsom and Ewell Times** will publish details of each of the NINE BIG plans for Epsom and Ewell. These plans are proposed in the **DRAFT LOCAL PLAN** that is out for public consultation till 17th March. We do not intend to state any support or opposition but may ask some questions.

Hook Road Car Park and SGN Site

This near 12 acres site comprises a public car park, retail units, an education establishment and a utilities site containing redundant gas holders.

The site is to be allocated for a comprehensive residential led mixed use development, comprising:

- At least 640 new homes
- Student Accommodation (potential for about 400 student rooms)
- Mixed use ground floor active frontages accommodating space for office, retail and creative start-ups
- Performing Arts Centre
- Café
- Building heights ranging between 2 and 7 storeys
- Two-level podium parking (i.e., parking underneath a building) with smart technology solution allowing different users to access spaces at different times of the day/evening
- Provision of a new public square adjacent to the leisure centre entrance
- A neighbourhood park in the heart of the development with direct connection to the existing Public Rights of Way network
- Relocated SGN (the gas company formerly known as Scotia Gas Networks) infrastructure
- Improved public realm and connectivity within the site and to adjoining areas

The reasons for the plans are to regenerate this brownfield site in a highly sustainable location that is currently unattractive and under-utilised. Its successful regeneration is important for the success and attractiveness of the town centre.

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There is the opportunity to redevelop the site into a prominent, high-density, mixed-use development, which would result in an improved, attractive and better utilised environment to the eastern gateway of the town centre. New development would offer the opportunity for a better connected and rejuvenated area that would attract new residents and businesses to Epsom Town Centre.

When will the site be developed?

It is expected that a planning application will be submitted for the comprehensive redevelopment of the main site in the early part of the plan period with development likely to start by 2029.

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Knights give Sutton & Epsom a hard day

Havant RFC 50 – Sutton & Epsom 5. Saturday 18th February.

The traditional close encounters of the rugby kind between Sutton & Epsom and Havant had a Rugby Lane resurrection in November when the Hampshire men secured a hard fought 30-27 success. The Hooks Lane faithful are enjoying a splendid campaign this season having eight wins out of nine at home with only the table-topping Dons have downed their colours to the tune of 16-11 in a game where the hosts suffered four yellow cards. It was always going to be a mighty challenge for the Black & Whites against the club sitting second in the league and there was to be no underdog story as Havant enjoyed an 8-try triumph by 50-5.

On a cold, overcast afternoon with the sound of the rattlers in the grandstand Freddie Bunting kicked off the match. The opening five minutes was one-way traffic and the blue sign with the white arrow was pointing towards the Sutton try-line. Eschewing thoughts of kicking the ball Havant were keen to stretch the legs of their stylish back division. The initial sparring ended with the ball being brought back for a penalty that the hosts kicked to within 15 metres of the visitors' line. Ross Parkins caught the lineout and the forwards advanced. The backs were released and a long pass introduced fullback Cam Smith into the line and relishing the gap in the defence he opened the scoring. Though the conversion drifted wide it was 5-0 to Havant and moment later it would be 12-0. Following concerted pressure Reuben Knight was stopped under the posts but a dextrous backhanded pass out of the tackle gifted brother Joel the simplest of scores and he added the extras to boot.

Sutton & Epsom are not unfamiliar with trailing matches in the first quarter this season. Finally, they had some phases but having made little progress they were advanced by a well-placed Freddie Bunting kick. Soon after they won a penalty and chose to decline the 3-point option and they kicked into the corner. The disappointment at losing the 5-metre lineout was replaced instantly by euphoria. Havant tapped the ball into their in-goal area and Tom Brooker reacted the quickest for a Sutton try. Though the conversion from the flank drifted narrowly wide the Black & Whites only trailed 5-12. From the restart problems began to mount for the visitors. They were penalised under pressure at the scrummage. The ball was kicked into the corner and the initial triumph of halting the Havant catch and drive was tempered by James Caddy being shown a yellow card. The hosts took

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advantage of their numerical superiority with Try Number 3. The next 5-metre lineout was overthrown but recovered by Reuben Knight and from the ruck the ever-alert Ben Holt sniped from close-range. The errant conversion meant that it was now 17-5 to the Bedhampton boys at the end of the first quarter.

In the Rugby Lane fixture Havant were denied the bonus point being tryless in the second period. Invoking that spirit Sutton set forth to reduce the deficit. The pressure from the Surrey men saw Havant receive a yellow card as Will Brock left the fray. Just before that Mr Tompkins was very busy with his notebook when James Caddy returned S&E emptied their bench as Messrs Bell, Boaden & Tame were replaced by Messrs Farrell, Parsons & London, though the latter had temporarily switched with Baptiste-Wilson for an earlier scrummage. This was tactical rather than injury-induced. Though Sutton Mark 2 fared little better against the Hooks Lane XV who were not prepared to rest on their laurels. Robust running from flanker Wes Dugan saw him swat away would-be tacklers and touchdown

under the posts. Joel Knight added the easiest of conversions for 24-5 and a bonus point was deposited into the bank. The hosts had not finished and rounded off the first half with their fifth try. The ball found Harry Carr on the flank who used his speed and strength to score in the corner. The conversion failed but the hosts led 29-5 and soon after the half concluded and the teams retreated to the warmth of their dressing rooms for words of encouragement.

The hosts were in no mood for charity and extended their lead within five minutes of the restart. The Sutton cause was not helped by dropping the kick-off that gifted territory and possession to the Havant XV. After sustained pressure Joel Knight forced his way over from short distance for his second, and Havant's sixth, try. The centre converted his try for a 36-5 lead. The Hooks Lane coaches rang the changes in personnel in a more singular fashion than the visitors. Firstly, the sizeable lineout presence of Ross Parkins was replaced by Matt Whitehead and five minutes later Jonah North was swapped for Rory Penfold on the wing. The Black & Whites started to enjoy more possession but their improving efforts were undone by poor passing. The Hampshire scrum-half, Ben Holt, fell victim to white line fever and ignored Richard Janes to be heldup over line by excellent S&E cover. Moments later the errant Holt made amends and finished clinically from a metre. Joel Knight bisected the uprights for 43-5.

The game entered the final quarter with the result beyond doubt but plenty to play for in terms of pride. Whether it was going to be a case of damage limitation or a spirited finale with consolation scores for Sutton remained to be seen. George London, as he has done so often before, took the game to the opposition, driving his tackler back yards in contact he sought to inspire the Black & Whites. Their followed a bizarre passage of play when the visitors turned over the ball four times in just over a minute. To be fair drizzle and dropping temperatures had made handling increasingly challenging as the game became somewhat scrappy.

Inside the last ten minutes winger Harry Carr produced a moment of brilliance with a blindside break at express pace. Though he was denied the individual glory replacement Matt Whitehead was on hand for the final flourish to score Havant's eighth try. Joel Knight made it five from eight from his boot that added to his brace of tries brought his personal tally to 20 points in the 50-5 scoreline. Soon after Ben Holt added a yellow card to his entertaining afternoon and retired to the sidelines and Wes Dugan stepped in at 9. Sutton, with the extra man, pressed hard for a consolation try. Teams do not sit second in the table if they have a porous defence and the hosts defended their line as if they led by a solitary point rather than 45. Time and again thumping tackles repelled the S&E pack. The ball went wide and the adamantine line stood firm as the Rugby Lane men knocked on. Havant cleared and the Black & White army retreated with renewed sympathy for Sisyphus. In the last knockings it was the hosts who looked like ending with a final score. A fine break by Joel Knight saw the inside pass blocked. Then Harry Carr was denied a try as he just failed to reach his chip ahead. The referee blew his whistle and Havant had deservedly won with a bonus point by 50-5.

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The combination of robust ball carrying forwards and dynamic backs spearheaded by the trio of Knights was more than enough to defeat the visitors. For the Black & Whites it was the third Saturday on the trot against top three opposition and once more it was a case of spirited resistance in adversity. Their cause was not helped by early scotomata in their

defensive alignment. Though they had to make do with limited territory and possession they were too often undone by errant passing.

Next Saturday S&E head to the coast to fulfil the Brighton fixture that succumbed to the freezing temperatures before Christmas. At Rugby Lane in September the Black & Whites enjoyed their finest hour with a thrilling 42-24 triumph and would dearly love a repeat performance.

Sutton & Epsom
Alex Mawdsley, Kyren Ghumra, Sam Hurley, Lawrence Elliott, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Freddy Bunting, Austin Bell, Tom Boaden, Alex Mount, Will Lloyd, George Drye ©, Josh Glanville, Ben Tame, James Caddy & Tom Brooker.
Replacements: (all used) Chris Farrell, George London, & Ross Parsons.

Havant
Cam Smith, Harry Carr, Joel Knight ©, Jacob Knight, Jonah North, Reuben Knight, Ben Holt, Luke Marks, Sean Shepherd, Tam Lindsay, Richard Janes, Ross Parkins, Will Brock, Wes Dugan & Dylan Lawley.
Replacements: Jez Smith, Matt Whitehead & Rory Penfold.

Will Me'lud halt ULEZ expansion to Epsom borders?

A coalition of five councils has today (Thursday 16 February) launched a Judicial Review to challenge Transport for London (TfL) and the Mayor of London's decision to expand the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) to outer London boroughs.

The London boroughs of Bexley, Bromley, Harrow and Hillingdon and Surrey County Council have brought legal action following TfL's announcement in November 2022 that it would push on with proposals to expand the scheme in August 2023 despite strong opposition from across outer London and beyond including concerns over how it is being delivered.

The coalition will challenge the expansion in the High Court on five grounds:

1. Failure to comply with relevant statutory requirements

2. Unlawful failure to consider expected compliance rates in outer London

3. The proposed scrappage scheme was not consulted upon

4. Failure to carry out any cost benefit analysis

5. Inadequate consultation and/or apparent predetermination arising from the conduct of the consultation

Cllr Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said: "We are committed to delivering a greener future, but it must be done in a practical and sustainable way. We are dismayed at the lack of discussion or consideration given to these proposals by the Mayor of London. The impact on many Surrey residents and businesses will be significant and we will not stand by and watch that happen with no mitigations offered from the Mayor.

"To date, our requests for due consideration to be given to these mitigations have not been acknowledged, let alone acted upon. It's disappointing that we, along with other local authorities, have to resort to legal proceedings to try and bring the Mayor of London to the table, but we have no choice but to do so."

Cllr Ian Edwards, Leader of Hillingdon Council, said: "Our position has remained unchanged from when TfL's plans were first mooted – ULEZ is the wrong solution in outer London as it will have negligible or nil impact on air quality but will cause significant social and economic harm to our residents. We shared this view in our response to the TfL consultation last summer and we've said it since when the plans were confirmed in November. Now, we'll say it in the courts.

"We believe Sadiq Khan's decision to impose this scheme on outer London boroughs is unlawful – his spending nearly £260

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million of public money without any cost benefit analysis. Hillingdon, and the other coalition local authorities wouldn't dream of making decisions in this fashion.

"The predominant effect of ULEZ expansion will be to financially cripple already struggling households, further isolate the elderly and harm our local economy with negligible or no improvement to air quality. Investment in improved transport links – on a par with those in areas within the existing ULEZ – is the better way to reduce car use in Hillingdon."

Cllr Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE, Leader of the London Borough of Bexley, said: "We have been clear from the start that we believe air quality is important but that ULEZ is the wrong solution. By wanting to expand ULEZ to outer London boroughs it appears that the Mayor's message is you can pollute as long as you can afford the £12.50.

"We believe he should give the monies that he has allocated to ULEZ to the boroughs who actually understand outer London and the transport connectivity problems our residents face to come up with innovative solutions that will deliver better, more practical results.

"We are also very concerned about the mental wellbeing of our residents who we know are already anxious about the installation of ULEZ and the very real prospect that they won't be able to use their cars to get to work, visit relatives and friends, shop or attend health appointments.

"We are standing up for our residents who have given us a clear message of what they think of his plan."

Cllr Colin Smith, Leader of Bromley Council, said: "We have been sounding the alarm about Mayor Khan's attempted tax raid on the outer 'London' suburbs for many months now. The fundamental truth as to his true intention is now increasingly plain for all to see.

"In Bromley, this socially regressive tax directly threatens jobs, the viability and availability of small businesses, and causing significant damage to vital care networks, as well as creating a completely avoidable spike in the cost of living locally, at a time when some households are already struggling to make ends meet.

"To attempt to do all of this under cover of a false health scare over air quality, when the Mayor's own research confirms that Bromley has the second cleanest air in London, also, that extending ULEZ to the boundaries of the M25 will make no discernible difference to air quality locally, is frankly unforgivable.

"The upset, pain and anxiety this has caused locally is immense, which is why, even at this late stage, I once again call on the Mayor to withdraw this spiteful proposal."

The five grounds and a summary of each:

1.Failure to comply with relevant statutory requirements
Schedule 23 to the Greater London Authority Act 1999 governs the making of "charging schemes." The Mayor decided to extend ULEZ by varying the existing scheme (which applies to inner London). Although Schedule 23 does permit a charging scheme to be varied, the proposed changes are so wide ranging that they amount to a whole new charging scheme which cannot be introduced by way of a variation. In addition, Schedule 23 contains procedural safeguards in the making of a charging scheme which have not been followed by the Mayor.

2. Unlawful failure to consider expected compliance rates in outer London
The Mayor's failure to provide any meaningful information as to how he expects an instant 91 per cent compliance rate was unfair, and specifically, the Mayor did not respond to Hillingdon's consultation response that the compliance assumptions "were not fit for purpose." In addition, the consultation documents were unclear and confusing and prevented consultees from making proper responses.

3. The proposed scrappage scheme was not consulted upon
In making his decision to extend ULEZ the Mayor committed to a scrappage scheme costing £110 million. Details of the scrappage scheme only become available following his decision and were not subject to prior consultation. In particular, the Mayor's decision to only offer the scrappage scheme to those residing in London was not consulted upon, although this was highlighted in the consultation response from Surrey County Council. Given the importance of the scrappage scheme to the Mayor's decision, a consultation on the scrappage scheme should have taken place.

4. Failure to carry out any cost benefit analysis
Treasury Guidance recommends a cost benefit analysis where a policy decision requires the use of "significant new" public money. No such analysis was undertaken by the Mayor and no explanation given as to why one was inappropriate. Given that the implementation cost is estimated at £160 million and that the Mayor has introduced a separate £110 million scrappage scheme, and that the expansion is expected to generate a net operating surplus of £200 million in the first full year of operation, his decision clearly involves "significant new" public money.

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5. Inadequate consultation and/or apparent predetermination arising from the conduct of the consultation
The consultation exercise contained 15 questions with drop-down answers, only one of which sought to address the question of whether the expansion should go ahead. In addition, following disclosure by the Greater London Authority (GLA) of background consultation information to the GLA Conservatives, it appears that a number of "organised responses" were excluded by TfL particularly those which opposed the expansion. This took place during the consultation and the way in which this happened suggests that the Mayor had predetermination.

Related reports:

A sign of no signs to come on ULEZ?

ULEZ will come to Epsom and Ewell borders

Yet more on ULEZ….

More on Epsom and Ewell and Surrey and ULEZ

Council's last minute opposition to ULEZ extension.

Surrey County failed SEND boy

Surrey County Council has been ordered to apologise and pay a family £7,400 after failing a young boy with special educational needs. The local government and social care ombudsman published its finding today. It found Surrey County Council failed to provide the boy his full entitlement of education and therapy for 18 months and fined the local authority due the frustration, distress. and lost education it caused.

The boy's mother raised the complaint in June 2021. As part of his education, health, and care plan, the boy should receive 15 hours of tutoring a week, along with speech, language and occupational therapy. Between September 2020 and January 2021 "he received just four hours a week. This rose to six hours a week in February 2021."

In April 2021 a special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) tribunal ordered the council to increase this to 25 hours a week, including weekly therapeutic provision, and animal therapy. Full speech and language therapy did not begin until September 2021. Animal therapy, despite the mother alerting the council that sessions had not started in May 2021, did not begin until March 2022 – as the council did not follow up her complaints, the ombudsman found.

In December 2021, the boy's relationship with his occupational therapist was said to have broken down but Surrey County Council did not put in an alternative until March 2022.

Michael King, local government and social care ombudsman, said: "Councils cannot delegate their duties to ensure provision laid out in young people's EHC Plans are delivered. After councils issue these plans we expect them to ensure all the provision included is in place – and if it is not, it should act to secure it without delay. In this case the boy missed out on a significant amount of tuition and therapies for a prolonged period, despite a previous investigation by us which found the son did not get education between 2018 and 2020. It is disappointing that the council did not learn from the issues raised in my first investigation."

Mr King said he had further concerns over the way Surrey County Council dealt with the mother's complaints, which at one stage took 11 months to handle. The council's own policy states it should have taken a maximum of 30 days.

Following the investigation Surrey County Council must now write to the mother and apologise for its faults and the injustice it caused. It must also pay £5,400 for the boy's his lost hours of education and therapy, £1,000 to the boy's mother for the prolonged frustration and distress it caused which it compounded with poor complaint handling, and a further £1,000 to the boy in recognition of the distress caused to him.

It must also carry out a review of how it arranges and monitors its provisions and complaint handling for its children and young people services.

Mr King added: "The council has accepted my recommendations to improve its processes and I hope the better oversight this will bring will ensure other children and young people in Surrey do not miss out on the education and therapy they are entitled to in the same way."

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Surrey County Council now has three months to consider the report and confirm its actions. A spokesperson for the county council said: “The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has issued a report following its investigation of a complaint about Surrey County Council. The complaint was about education and children’s services. The Ombudsman found that there had been fault on the part of the council, and this had caused injustice to the complainant. Surrey County Council takes the findings very seriously and apologises for any distress the family experienced, and has agreed to take action which the ombudsman regards as providing a satisfactory remedy for the complaint.”

The council must now consider the report and tell the ombudsman within three months (or such longer period as the ombudsman may agree) what it proposes to do.

Epsom rail crossing fatal accident lessons

In the afternoon of 21st April 2022, a pedestrian was struck and fatally injured by an out-of-service passenger train at Lady Howard footpath and bridleway crossing on Epsom Common. The pedestrian, who was walking on the crossing with a dog and pushing a wheeled trolley bag, started to cross the railway tracks shortly after a train had passed. She was struck by a second train, which was travelling in the opposite direction to the first. The driver of the train involved in the accident sounded the train’s horn on seeing the pedestrian on the crossing. The pedestrian responded by hurrying forwards towards the exit of the crossing, but was unable to get clear of the path of the train in time to avoid being struck.

The **Rail Accident Investigation Board** (RAIB) carried out an investigation and has just issued its report and findings.

The investigation found that the pedestrian was apparently unaware that the second train was approaching when she made the decision to cross; there is no evidence that she was aware of it and/or had misjudged the time available to cross. This was because, although the pedestrian looked twice in the direction of the second train before starting to cross, the front of this second train was hidden behind the first train, which was moving away on the line nearest to her. RAIB also found it was possible that the pedestrian did not perceive the risk arising from the possibility that the first train was hiding another approaching train.

A probable underlying factor was that Network Rail had not provided any effective additional risk mitigation at the crossing, despite having previously deemed the risk to users to be unacceptable. Network Rail had planned to install miniature stop lights at the crossing, but complexities with the technology required at this location meant that this solution was not ready for implementation before the accident occurred. There is little evidence that Network Rail considered effective options to mitigate the risk on an interim basis while this solution was progressed, although they fitted additional warning signs for users and a

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camera to monitor crossing use.

Recommendations

As a result of this investigation, RAIB has made two recommendations, both to Network Rail. The first is intended to address the risk to pedestrians at crossings of this type arising from a second approaching train being hidden from view by another train. The second recommendation concerns the implementation of appropriate interim risk mitigations at level crossings that are awaiting long-term solutions.

Epsom and Ewell Council raises tax 2.99%

Epsom and Ewell's Council tax is to be increased by 2.99% for 2023/2024. At a meeting of the Full Council last night the budget for 2023/2024 was approved.

Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee, Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town Ward) proposed the budget with a wide-ranging speech. The Residents' Association led Borough Council was succeeding in balancing the budget despite many challenges. He made a number of points including:

1. The Government's "disastrous mini-budget" of September 2022 that led to increases in interest rates.
2. The increase in home-working of Council staff arising from Co-Vid.
3. The frequency of resignations of senior staff.
4. The "meddling" of Surrey County Council. The failure to consult over the abolition of Local Committees (a forum that brought County and Borough representatives together), the decisions to bring back to County parking enforcement and verge cutting etc.
5. The invasion of Ukraine and increase in energy bills.
6. Negative rate support grant – meaning Epsom and Ewell Council pays central Government not the other way around.
7. The lack of Surrey police resources to patrol Epsom and Ewell.
8. The challenge of homelessness "over which we have no control".
9. The unqualified audit acceptance of the last budget.
10. The success of the Council owned Epsom Playhouse's pantomime season.
11. The success of the Council's recycling programmes.
12. The Council's support for Epsom's Business Improvement District company.
13. The work done in bringing the draft Local Plan to its consultation stage.

He explained: "The council would be spending £29.5million in the coming year, with £7.4m of the borough's £28.8m income coming from council tax.

He said that the Council was now entering a phase of stability and he referred to the preceding item on the meeting's agenda that approved the permanent appointment of **Jackie King** as Chief Executive Officer of the Council. On that earlier item there was some controversy when Cllr **Debbie Monskfield** (Labour – Court Ward) asked how Councillors could vote to approve a new pay scale when the figures were not apparent? It was stated that senior staff, including the new CEO, were to get pay rises up to possibly 17% compared with the 3% for other staff. The new pay rates were nevertheless approved.

In reply to the budget speech Leader of the Opposition Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour – Court Ward) opposed an increase in Council Tax at this time of crisis for the many who have to "choose between heating or eating." "Residents who lie awake at night wondering how they can possibly pay their bills, their rents or mortgage and their increased council tax." She accused the ruling RA Group of "Wanting to keep their precious venues forever the same. Bourne Hall must provide the most subsidised Zumba classes in the country."

She suggested there were other ways to raise revenue and save money. Community driven litter picking with free skips reducing the expense of dealing with fly-tipping. Not to provide free pre-Christmas parking again. The amalgamation of backroom services with other Councils. Reducing homelessness.

Later Cllr **Eber Kington** (RA Ewell Court) fired back at Labour stating that years in a row Labour had objected to increases in

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Council tax and if they had had their way cumulatively the losses would be millions. **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) chipped in "Who would want to live in Croydon where isn't it Labour who have ruled it for ages and their taxes are increasing by how much?"

Cllr **David Gulland** (Lib Dem – College) said that he supported the increase in Council Tax but would vote against the budget as it failed to address two significant failures of the Residents' Association led Council. Firstly, the failure to adequately address the nuisance going on at the Chalk Pit waste site. Was Epsom to become "skip-city"? he asked. Secondly, the failure to inform Councillors of the adverse findings of both the Local Government Ombudsman and the Information Commissioner in relation to the complaints of a resident. He didn't like the overall direction of the RA.

23 Residents' Association Councillors voted in favour of the budget and increase in Epsom and Ewell's Council tax. The 3 Labour and 2 Liberal Democrat councillors voted against and there was one abstention. The single Conservative Councillor, **Bernie Muir**, (Stamford Ward) was not present.

Epsom and Ewell's Council Tax Bands are as follows:

Band	2022/2023	Increase	Amount	Annual 2023/2024
A	£1,423.45	2.99%	£42.56	£1,466.01
B	£1,660.69	2.99%	£49.65	£1,710.34
C	£1,897.93	2.99%	£56.75	£1,954.68
D	£2,135.17	2.99%	£63.84	£2,199.01
E	£2,609.65	2.99%	£78.03	£2,687.68
F	£3,084.13	2.99%	£92.22	£3,176.35
G	£3,558.62	2.99%	£106.40	£3,665.02
H	£4,270.34	2.99%	£127.68	£4,398.02

Related reports:

Surrey County Council sets 23/24 budget

Surrey County Council proposes 2023/24 budget

Senior local Councillor slams Surrey's budget consultation

Budget Report: More council tax for Epsom and Ewell re 2022/2023 budget