



Government bailout to ease Woking's debt burden

Taxpayers will cover the cost of Woking Borough Council's financial folly after the government agreed to "aid the reduction" of the bankrupt authority's multi-billion pound debt.

The bail out will initially cover debt owed by the borough in 2026-27 but could be extended if needed.

The pledge is an attempt to prevent Woking from immediately destroying any new authority it joins as part of the Government's merger plans for Surrey's councils.

Woking Borough Council declared itself effectively bankrupt in 2023 when its regeneration plans collapsed leaving it with debts expected to £2.6billion and annual repayments far outstripping what it brings in every year through council tax.

The problem has since spilled into neighbouring councils after the Government selected Surrey and its 11 boroughs and districts to become a newly devolved and reorganised and merged-mayoral authority.

On April 4, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said liabilities should be locally managed by councils.

Since then, the Government has committed to "supporting any new authorities in Surrey with the rationalisation of Woking's assets, whether through the provision of interim financial support" it said this could be involve "further tranches of financial support for any remaining unsupported debt" until "new authorities are financially sustainable".

The council would still be expected to continue cutting costs and finding "best value" for taxpayers by selling off its assets - even after the Surrey was reorganised, according to papers published this week.

Leader of Woking Borough Council, Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, said: "We welcome the government's statement of intent regarding future financial support. It marks an important step towards addressing our debt position as part of wider discussions on the future structure of local government in Surrey.

"Whilst there is much still to be agreed, this announcement provides a degree of certainty as we continue to work closely with government and other Surrey councils to secure a sustainable financial future for Woking and ensure the best possible outcomes for residents.

"We are doing all we can to put our house in order by setting a balanced budget and having a strategic plan to sell assets. We remain committed to delivering our Improvement and Recovery Plan to the ensure that we enter any future arrangements in the strongest position possible."

ENDS

Will Surrey's Debts Force Us to Have a Unitary Authority?

Billions of pounds in crushing debt could force Surrey and its boroughs and districts to become a single mega council - potentially merged with a neighbour, following government feedback on its devolution and reorganisation plans.

Two plans were submitted in March over how to dissolve local government in the county and create a new streamlined system.

The county council and a handful of the boroughs favoured splitting Surrey into two authorities with Elmbridge worried about being 'punished' if it is grouped with debt-ridden neighbours - while the majority of the districts favoured three. Both would have an overarching and directly elected mayor.

Now, those plans could all be for nothing if they are unable to demonstrate how to deal with the more than £5 billion of debt owed - and in particular £2.6billion from bankrupt Woking Borough Council and £1billion at Spelthorne where government commissioners have recently been appointed to take over.

The letter from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government was sent to all chief executives of Surrey's boroughs, districts and county council, in reply to the councils' plans.

It read: "The county and district co-authored plan shows that greater efficiencies are available where there is less disaggregation, with the single unitary enabling the greatest efficiency that could benefit the management of local debt.



"Given the scale of the financial challenges facing Surrey, we would welcome further detail on how the ability to manage debt compares in each of the different options.

"As the long-term financial sustainability of the three unitary option seems most challenging in this context, we will need more information on how you will manage the risks of disaggregation to meet the financial sustainability criteria as well as the approach to debt management."

"We suggest meeting to discuss in more detail local proposals for managing debt."

The ministry said that if Surrey was to shift towards a single unitary model, unlocking devolution would mean partnering up with neighbouring authorities or joining a neighbouring mayoral authority. "

To achieve this, the area will need to ensure the proposed devolution geography meets the criteria set out in the English Devolution White Paper.

A Surrey-only devolution would only work, it added, under the two or three unitary council proposals "subject to achieving sensible population ratios between unitaries".

The ministry also specifically asked for evidence on how any new merged authority "would enable financially viable councils, including identifying which option best delivers value for money for council tax payers".

It added; "We note the desire for clarity and further discussions around the area's debt position and your preferred option for Government to write off the current estimated debt of £1.5bn."

Woking Borough Council is short £1.5billion - once all its assets are accounted for.

It continues: "The default position is that assets and liabilities remain locally managed by councils, but we acknowledge that there are exceptional circumstances where there has been failure linked to capital practices.

"Where that is the case, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation.

"Commissioners should be engaged in these discussions.

"It would be helpful to see further detail in proposals on the projected financial sustainability of proposed unitaries and how they could manage debt locally."

ENDS

Press statement from the Leaders of Surrey's District and Borough Councils

Today, district and borough councils have published proposals for local government reorganisation on their websites, to be debated at Council meetings across the county in the coming days. Final proposals will be submitted to Government by 9 May 2025.

Eight of the eleven district and borough councils are proposing a three unitary council model for Surrey. They believe that this is the best way to preserve local democracy and accountability, and would ensure that new councils align with Surrey's existing economic and community identities - creating the foundation for more responsive governance and stronger local economies. There is also a proposal for two unitary councils being submitted by Surrey County Council. Those councils that have been undecided so far will make a final decision between the 6 and 8 May.

The new structure for local government will replace the current two-tier system of district, borough and county councils.

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Surrey Leaders Group and Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Residents' Association (Majority Group) said:

"This is a significant achievement and the culmination of much collaboration and hard



work by council leaders and officers across the county.

“There are still issues to be resolved, including how debt will be managed. Over the coming weeks and months, we will continue to work at pace towards a vision for the county that delivers for our residents and communities, that enables us to unlock the wider benefits that devolution can ultimately bring.

“I’d also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who took part in the recent resident engagement which sought opinion on shaping Surrey’s future, the results of which indicated clear public support for a three unitary model of local government.

“We also appreciate the time given to us by representatives from charities, parish and town councils, residents forums, health services, community groups and others across the county in our stakeholder engagement exercise and roundtable group sessions. It was really important to make sure as many voices as possible were heard in this journey about the risks and opportunities of changes that will impact local services and Communities.”

Government is expected to decide on proposals by the end of the year. If approved, legislation will be passed to allow the changes, and elections for new shadow unitary councils will be held in May 2026, with a view to the new unitaries going live in May 2027.

Proposals are published on council websites:

- Elmbridge Borough Council
- Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
- Guildford Borough Council
- Mole Valley District Council
- Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
- Runnymede Borough Council
- Spelthorne Borough Council
- Surrey Heath Borough Council
- Waverley Borough Council
- Woking Borough Council

- Ends -

Mole Valley Solar farm decision

The biggest possible solar farm was before Mole Valley District Council last week with councillors voting to reject the eco energy project – despite warnings they could lose taxpayers hundreds of thousands of pounds on appeal.

Plans for a 55 hectare solar farm in Cobham Road in Fetcham, large enough to power about one third of all the homes in the borough, came before the council’s development management committee on April 23.

Councillors narrowly voted seven to five with one abstention to refuse the 49.5 megawatts plant arguing it was an inappropriate use of green belt land and too close to ancient woodland.

The decision went against the advice of officers who said Mole Valley’s decision would likely be overturned on appeal – and the council charged costs

Cllr Abhiram Magesh (Liberal Democrat; Mickleham, Westcott & Okewood) said: “It will end up costing the council hundreds of thousands of pounds.



"It will affect the council's balance budget."

He said decisions like this were "not defensible by the legal material planning consideration" and that councillors needed to use vote with their brains, "not with your heart"

"What we can be considering, is the economic impact and the financial impact to not only the wider council but the area."

The developers, Ethical Power, had argued there was an "overriding" case that delivering renewable energy outweighed the "modest impacts" and that they were "proud to bring forward the project".

Their spokesperson added that it represented a "unique opportunity" to "tackle climate change in Mole Valley" by contributing to energy independence and clean power.

Had the power plant been any larger it would have been classified as a nationally significant project requiring government sign off, the meeting heard.

Others challenged the environmental benefits of green energy at the expense of locally grown food and argued that the 40 year proposed life span of the site was anything but temporary.

Cllr Simon Budd (Conservative; Brockham, Betchworth, Buckland Box Hill & Headley) said: "The land that you are covering up, It's good quality land that grows food.

"At the moment the food is grown in Fetcham and its sold in Fetcham in a farmers shop in Fetcham, you've got zero miles, you've got grain that goes off to make bread, fantastic zero miles on it.

"If you cover up land in Fetcham people have still got to eat so you've got to import grain.

He added: "I feel very strongly about turning what is good agricultural land into what is basically you are ruining the countryside you really are ruining it.

"The gain of a little bit of electric is not worth the loss of this land."

County council set to propose two unitary councils for Surrey

Subject to Cabinet approval, Surrey County Council plans to submit to government a proposal for two unitary councils for local government reorganisation in the county. These two councils, arranged by East and West, would replace the existing 12 councils and unlock further devolution in Surrey.

In council papers published today, the county council outlines detailed analysis to evidence that two councils would be the most beneficial model for Surrey's future. The proposal, which sets out a robust plan for local community engagement, also includes letters of support from key partners, business and community leaders, as well as Elmbridge Borough Council.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council said: "Our analysis shows that two unitary councils would bring the greatest benefit to Surrey's residents. Two councils, in partnership with a Mayor for Surrey, would save money, strengthen and simplify local government and with an East and West arrangement both councils would be in a strong position to continue to deliver high quality services to all Surrey residents. Of course, consideration must be given to the differing levels of debt that the authorities would potentially inherit, and we're in talks with government about our request that the stranded debt be written off as well as providing financial support to those borough councils that need it.

"Most importantly, this proposal strengthens local community engagement. We know that residents want high quality services that are easy to access, and they want a real say in services and decisions that affect them. That's why we're proposing the creation of community-level boards across Surrey.

"These community boards will be locally determined but we would expect them to include representation from health partners, Surrey Police, voluntary groups, councillors, council staff, local Town and Parish Councils and Residents Associations. We plan to pilot these boards over the coming months, and residents will have a say in how they are set up and delivered.

"We're in a strong position as a county council, with good quality services and an excellent track record of stable finances after years of successful transformation. And working together with our residents and partners, we are well placed to deliver this important reorganisation. Ultimately, this work will unlock further devolution, meaning Surrey can elect a mayor which will bring



more power, flexibility and funding closer to communities.”

Cllr Mike Rollings, Leader of Elmbridge Borough Council said: *“While Elmbridge, like other districts and boroughs, is not overly enamoured with the government’s local government reorganisation, throughout this process, we have maintained an open-minded stance regarding the optimal number of new unitary authorities. Our primary goal is to ensure the best interests of Elmbridge, as well as Surrey as a whole. We have always said that our decision will be grounded in robust evidence and data and we will continue to analyse, research, and scrutinise all options until we are confident that the best solution for unitarisation in Surrey has been identified.*

“Based on the proposals we have seen, we think an East/West split could make the most sense for Elmbridge both in terms of financial stability, increased flexibility to meet housing needs and the potential to minimise the impact on the character and appearance of Elmbridge.

“We will continue to work across the county to support the development of proposals that lead to the best results for our residents, and we will debate these at extraordinary meetings of our Council and Cabinet on 6 May.”

The proposal includes a recommended geographical model for the two councils, by East and West, using current District Council geographies with Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Runnymede, Woking, Guildford and Waverley residents in the West of Surrey, and Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Epsom & Ewell, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge residents in the East.

This model has similar levels of population, land area, total household numbers, homelessness, house building targets, waste collection, business activity, pupil distribution, number of birth and death registrations, and total miles of public highways. Demand and budget requirements would also be similar for Adult Social Care and Children Social Services across both councils and this geography makes use of the neighbouring economic benefits of London, Heathrow airport, and Gatwick airport, with a similar mix of the urban and rural landscape that makes Surrey a fantastic place to live and work.

The overall populations of each new council would exceed the government’s minimum size of 500,000 residents.



SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL'S PROPOSAL FOR TWO UNITARY COUNCILS



Notes:

- In February, government asked Surrey to submit plans for local government reorganisation. Once this proposal has been approved by Surrey County Council's Cabinet on 7th May, it will be submitted to government by the 9th May deadline. A final decision is expected from government in the Autumn. The full council paper can be accessed here: <https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&Mid=9715&Ver=4>
- District and borough councils in Surrey are also discussing options for reorganisation at respective council meetings.
- Details of an online resident engagement event, due to be held in May, will be shared soon



£500 award for artistic contribution

The Epsom and Ewell Town-Twinning Association is delighted to invite applications for this year's **Cyril Frazer Award**.

The Cyril Frazer Award is a legacy set up as a memorial to Cyril Frazer, who died in 2016. He was Mayor of Epsom and Ewell when it was first twinned with Chantilly in 1995 and was a founding member of the association. As well as Twinning, one of his other great passions was singing, and he was a keen member of the Epsom Male Voice Choir.

Both are reflected in the requirements for the award of **£500**, which is available to individuals and groups within the Borough and will be awarded to qualified applicants who meet some or all of the following agreed criteria:

- Applicants live or study in the Borough
- The award meets a special need, such as mental or physical health
- It benefits young people
- It has cultural/educational value
- It is music or performing arts related
- It furthers friendships or links with Chantilly
- It supports a key twinning or community event

The prize will be awarded at the Twinning Association's AGM in June, and the deadline for applications is **May 31st 2025**.

For further information and to apply, please contact: diana@epsomtwinning.com.

Surrey Housing protocol agreed for people with mental health needs

An agreement between councils and NHS services in Surrey will help people with mental health needs find housing and avoid delays in leaving hospital.

The Surrey Mental Health and Housing Protocol sets out how services will work together to support people who find it difficult to secure long-term housing because of the mental health challenges they face.

By strengthening coordination between health, social care and housing, the protocol aims to help people find accommodation to aid their recovery and reduce the risk of becoming homeless.

The protocol, which sets out step-by-step guidance to services, will also help prevent delays in people leaving hospital, freeing up space for others in need.

Housing difficulties are a key factor in people having to stay in hospital longer than necessary. The protocol outlines clear processes for making sure that people have access to suitable housing when they are ready to be discharged.

The protocol also aims to help prevent evictions from tenancies and reduce incidents of cuckooing, where criminals exploit vulnerable people by taking over their homes for illegal activities such as drug-dealing.

Detailing a number of possible scenarios and the approaches to follow for each, the agreement encourages services to identify early warning signs of housing problems and work together to intervene proactively and find tailored solutions. This is especially important for people with complex needs or who face multiple disadvantages, such as unemployment, poor health, domestic abuse and trauma.

An earlier version of the protocol was introduced in 2016 but it has now been strengthened, updated and expanded, with a sharper focus on supporting people at the right time. Surrey organisations renewed their commitment by signing up to the



updated protocol in March.

Partners who have agreed the relaunched protocol are Surrey's 11 borough and district councils, Surrey County Council, Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, as the county's mental health NHS provider, and the five acute care hospitals in Surrey (Royal Surrey, Epsom, East Surrey, St Peter's and Frimley Park). The protocol can be found on the **Healthy Surrey website**.

Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, said: *"We know that safe and stable housing promotes good mental health, and this relaunched protocol is an important step forward in helping people stay in their homes or find suitable new ones at a time when they most need support."*

"By strengthening the way that services work together, we can help people earlier, supporting their recovery, independence and overall wellbeing, and making sure no one is left behind. With local government reorganisation on the horizon, this protocol will also support partners in getting ready for the changes ahead."

Jo Lynch, Chief Nursing Officer at Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, said: *"I am delighted we are jointly working with our partners in social care and housing to ensure people have access to suitable accommodation when they are ready to be discharged from hospital."*

"It can be complicated to understand how best to support people to get the housing they need. The joint protocol guides us on who we need talk to and the conversations we need to have to help people more quickly find housing that can support them with their recovery and which then frees up hospital beds for others in need."

The boroughs of Reigate & Banstead and Runnymede represented Surrey's 11 borough and district councils on a multi-agency group which worked on updating and strengthening the protocol.

Cllr Mus Tary, Executive Member for Housing and Support at Reigate & Banstead Borough Council, said: *"Officers from our Housing Team have been involved in the co-design of the updated protocol, alongside other partners, bringing their expertise on some of the housing challenges faced by those with mental health needs. We hope this protocol will ensure consistency across the partnership and lead to improved housing outcomes for some of our most vulnerable residents."*

Cllr Mike Smith, Chair of Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Committee said: *"Homelessness affects people from all walks of life, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. For those facing mental health challenges, securing and maintaining stable accommodation can be even more difficult. This updated and vital protocol prioritises early intervention and strengthens collaboration between housing, health, social care, and many other agencies to ensure no one falls through the cracks. By identifying housing issues early and providing tailored support, we can help people transition from hospital into housing—giving them stability and the best chance to recover and rebuild their lives."*

Waverley not waiving planning fees spark protests

Angry homeowners hit with hefty planning bills and court threats gathered outside Waverley Borough Council to protest against levies that have left some at risk of losing their homes, or going to jail.

About 20 people have so far come forward with what they say are huge and unexpected infrastructure levies for work done to their homes.

They have been shocked by the short notice to come up with, in some cases, £70,000 for work they would have been expected to be exempt from – and would have been if they'd filled out a form.

Instead they have been pursued and threatened with court action if they do not pay.

On Tuesday April 1, those affected protested outside the council's executive meeting and challenged the authority on whether it had any "genuine intent" to review its Community Infrastructure Levy process.

Community Infrastructure Levies are payable on developments of more than 100 square metres, unless homeowners actively apply for an exemption. Large developers expect there to be an infrastructure charge, which can often take the form of community buildings such as a doctor's surgery or hall. Where these are not suitable money can be paid.

The levy is used to offset the impact development has on an area and can be bid for by public bodies or community groups for projects.



The problem has been some people feel they are being wrongly hit with the fees – and the heavy handed approach the council has taken in chasing the money.

In most cases the council says it has been correct in issuing the bills -despite anger from those who feel wronged.

The exception, it said, was the highest profile case so far, of Steve and Caroline Dally who were stung with a £70,000 bill for a home extension and given no opportunity to argue their case.

The rest, the council argues are not as straightforward – with any long-term solutions not expected until at least May,

Councillor Liz Townsend, portfolio holder for planning said: “I can assure members here and residents that the council is committed to carrying out a discretionary review where householders previously subject to CIL liability can request a discretionary review.”

She added: “There have been a number of extremely speculative and scaremongering comments about the nature of this review by some councillors which is very concerning.

“However I would like to assure residents again that we are committed to investigating and assessing each individual case that is submitted to the council and the process for undertaking this will be fully disclosed in the report coming to the executive at the beginning of May.”

However, asked if the council had powers to withdraw liability notices for “whatever reasons it sees appropriate” the leader, Cllr Paul Follows, responded: “I think we are comfortable to acknowledge that’s what the regulation says. Yes. I don’t think there is anything else I can add to that but I am sure what the regulation says.”

Asked “For whatever reason you deem fit?”

Cllr Follows replied: “Yes – but at the same time I do think you have to recognise we can’t in ourselves act unlawfully in the withdrawal of the CIL liability – there are things we have to do here.

“This is not a straightforward process. If anybody has been advising you that it is a straightforward process I would consider widening your advice.

“One of the problems here – we’ve effectively got three categories of individuals in this process.

“Individuals who may have had some fault of the council, and although we’re still checking the details, for example would be Mr Dally who we’ve looked at – and most of us have concluded he was told something in error and I think there will probably be some remediation that takes place there.

“There are individuals who have been advised poorly...as part of their building project. Yes I can understand their frustration with the council but actually their issue is with the private advice which has been inaccurate and their first course of resolution would be through the liability insurance of the private advisor.

“And thirdly there are individuals that disagree with the concept of homeowner CIL but have been charged legally for it at this point of time and that’s subject to a different discussion of whether we should charge homeowners or not.

“It broadly falls into those three camps.”

The council said it would be taking this final group into consideration in May when it is due to discuss potential changes to CIL.

A longer term solution is not likely to be finalised until the council’s local plan – effectively the planning rules it must abide by – is signed off in 2027.

Image: Waverley CIL protests (image Waverley Conservative Council Group)

A towering decision by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has approved plans for hundreds of new homes. The former SGN Gasworks site on East Street in Epsom will see all of its buildings and infrastructure demolished to make way for new homes. The town’s “biggest planning application in years” has been approved. Members of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council planning committee agreed to the outline scheme for 456 homes by a majority vote on April 24. The development will see five high rise blocks, ranging from eight to twelve



storeys tall. A performing arts centre, educational buildings and an open public garden are also included in the plans. Of the proposed 456 homes, according to planning documents, 210 will be one-bedroom, 180 will be two-bedroom, and 66 will be three-bedroom units. A further 46 of the 456 homes will be social rent units and 21 wheelchair accessible, according to planning documents.

"You cannot build a nine-storey building behind someone's back door," said Richard Coles, an Epsom resident speaking against the scheme. He explained it would be "60 metres from my back door to someone's balcony, for some hundred or so properties". Mr Coles argued the new builds will make life significantly worse for those living immediately around the blocks. "We're not delivering for Epsom if we're not delivering for all our residents," Cllr Kim Spickett said. "We're not talking about overlooking buildings, we're talking about human beings." Responding to concerns, council planners said fears of overlooking is not such an issue in practice because neither resident can really make out the features or activities of a person that far away. Officers accepted sunlight would be reduced for six neighbouring homes and 23 student rooms but said the benefits of the scheme would outweigh the impact.

Wrestling with the application, Cllr Julian Freeman appreciated the residents' concerns but said "fear is often much worse than the reality". He added the borough is in a "housing crisis" and "for the greater good" the development will provide new homes for 600 or more people. Cllr Kate Chinn slammed the council for not building enough homes or social housing over the last five years. "We're now asking residents to pay the price for the failures of the past," she said. With only 68 car parking spaces for 456 homes, councillors urged for something to be done. Members worried about tradesmen needing to use cars for work or families driving to school. Around 21 spaces would be designated for wheelchair users which Cllr Freeman challenged as "excessive". Cllr Jan Mason said: "People living there actually will be defranchised." She claimed future residents might not be able to have people visiting the house or getting the work men round.

Officers said fewer parking bays would help "champion a change in attitude" to using cars and support the council's "ambitious target" of becoming carbon neutral by 2035. But some councillors said it was "unrealistic" to demand people to change their motor habits by restricting parking spaces. Just a 10 minute walk from Epsom train station, the applicants argued the development would be an immensely sustainable location. People can get to London Waterloo station in around 35 minutes. Members agreed conditions to the car management plan so it could come back to committee for further approval if needed.

Also included in the scheme, Laine Theatre Arts College will be replaced by a modern building. The development will be further detailed in separate planning applications, the report said. The site has been used as gas works for more than 150 years, according to documents, while a separate application for the same site has stated the storage facility for natural gas "has been permanently decommissioned and purged".

Image: Site Masterplan (Aerial) Formation Architects

McDonalds run out of Loch Fyne, Cobham

Plans for a McDonald's in Cobham have been thrown out.

McDonald's had hoped to find a new home on the former Loch Fyne Restaurant in Portsmouth Road on the outskirts of Cobham. Members of Elmbridge Borough Council's planning committee rejected the application by majority vote on April 24, against officer's recommendations to approve.

Councillors were unhappy that the new McDonald's would be within walking distance of schools and near an area of high social and economic deprivation. "McDonald's isn't a proper choice," Cllr Lawrence Wells said, "most of it is ultra-processed food."

The Liberal Democrat councillor for Cobham and Downside argued: "To young people and families who have very little access to healthy food or treats, a McDonald's will be like the witch's candy house to Hansel and Gretel."

North of the potential McDonald's site, argued Cllr Wells, there is a socially and economically deprived area between River View Gardens and Northfield Road. He claimed the 650-odd houses come in the fifth most underprivileged sub-ward in the whole of Surrey.

But Cllr Ashley Tilling accused groups of "middle class snobbery" in opposing the scheme. He said it was unlikely there would be such opposition if a Gail's or a Megan's decided to open there.

Councillors debated whether it was appropriate for a fast food restaurant and take away should be in walking distance from schools, parks and a children's home. Surrey County Council had also raised concerns about the potential health impacts the new



burger branch could have, being so close to areas where children congregate.

"You have a duty to protect the most vulnerable, you have the duty to protect the health and wellbeing of your constituents," Mr Sabi said, speaking for residents against the scheme at the meeting. He argued the council was using a London yardstick for walking distance to fast food places for a Surrey borough.

Fearing the chicken nugget chain would exacerbate issues of obesity and not promote healthy living, planning members refused the scheme. Officers said it was a matter of judgement and there was no evidence to suggest the American burger branch would make people less healthy.

Other councillors warned "we don't live in a totalitarian state where people are told what they must and mustn't eat" or that it is even their role on the planning committee to "combat obesity".

Ward councillor Katerina Lusk acknowledged the old Loch Fyne Restaurant is in "disrepair" and no other use has been found. Cllr Tilling also supported bringing the locally listed building "back to life" and re-using it in the community.

Despite the concerns, many people flagged the multi-million dollar company would bring huge financial benefits to the village, increasing visitors and supporting local business.

But Cllr Lusk highlighted the limited indoor dining options (60 covers) and proposed opening hours until midnight, which could mean it would be primarily used for takeaway. "More noise, more traffic and constant delivery movements- all spilling into an area already burdened with congestion and frequent flooding," Cllr Lusk said.

Submitted last year, the application has been hugely contentious. Hundreds of objections flooded in from residents, including an online petition reaching over 34,000 signatures. A similar strength of feeling was also boosted from those who want to see a closer Happy Meal in Cobham.

McDonald's has been approached for comment.

Related report:

Global fast-food giant targets Surrey village