

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council: Financial Crisis or Manageable Deficit?

15 February 2025



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is under increasing scrutiny following the resignation of Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley Ward) from the ruling Residents' Association (RA) group. His resignation letter cites a failure to address the "unhappy truths" about the borough's finances and warns that 2026 could be the year the Council "runs out of money". But is this a political exaggeration, or do the financial documents substantiate these concerns? A recent 78-page financial report prepared for councillors at the end of January 2025 sheds light on the borough's economic standing.

Cllr Coley, who has served in various leadership capacities—including Vice Chair of Audit & Scrutiny and Chair of Community & Wellbeing—states that despite his efforts to get clarity on the financial trajectory of the Council, he has been left without clear answers. His conclusion? The Council is heading for a financial crunch by 2026 with no viable plan in place to prevent it.

The specific concerns he raises include:

- Budget uncertainty for 2025/26 and beyond.
- Financial instability of Council-owned properties, which could have wider implications for the borough's assets and revenue streams.
- A lack of a clear strategy to prevent the Council from exhausting its financial reserves.

The Financial Report: Does It Confirm the Warnings?

The Financial Strategy Advisory Group's report (31 January 2025) is a key document shaping the Council's budget. Several aspects of this report support Cllr Coley's concerns:

1. A Deficit on the Horizon?

The Council's 2025/26 budget is delicately balanced, but its long-term financial plan suggests a deficit by 2026/27, growing further in 2027/28:

Year	Net Expenditure (£m)	Expected Income (£m)	Funding Shortfall (£m)
2025/26	10.27	10.27	0
2026/27	11.48	10.40	1.08
2027/28	12.24	10.72	1.52
2028/29	12.85	11.06	1.79

The projections indicate a potential funding crisis by 2026/27 unless new revenue streams or savings are identified.

2. Property and Investment Risks

- The Council relies significantly on income from its commercial property portfolio, including investments through Epsom & Ewell Property Investment Company Ltd (EEPIC).
- Rental income from commercial properties contributes £1.35m annually to the Council's budget, but there are concerns over sustainability if market conditions shift.
- In addition, £448,000 of this income is required to fund day-to-day services, raising questions about financial resilience.

3. Shrinking Government Support

- The New Homes Bonus (NHB), which has provided additional income, is set to shrink dramatically from £498,000 in 2024/25 to just £6,000 in 2025/26.

- The Government's Core Spending Power allocation to Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is effectively stagnant at £10.2m, meaning the Council is not receiving inflation-adjusted increases.
- The Fair Funding Review scheduled for 2026/27 could further reduce financial support for district councils like Epsom & Ewell.

4. Business Rates Volatility

- The Council is highly dependent on business rates, yet its share of retained rates is forecast to fluctuate. In 2025/26, it expects to retain £1.8m, but past years have shown this figure is not guaranteed.
- There is a £282,000 deficit in the business rates collection fund, a concern for future budgets.

Council Tax Increases as a Stopgap?

To address some financial pressures, the Council is proposing a 2.98% increase in Council Tax for 2025/26, which would:

- Raise an extra £228,467.
- Increase the average Band D household bill from £226.17 to £232.92 per year.
- Be just below the government's 3% cap before requiring a referendum.

However, even this increase will not be enough to fully close the funding gap beyond 2025/26.

What This Means for Residents

If Cllr Coley's concerns hold true, services could be at risk in 2026 and beyond. Potential consequences include:

- Cuts to local amenities, including cultural venues and community support.
- Higher fees for Council services, as seen in the proposal to increase charges by 6% in 2025/26.
- Reliance on reserves, which could lead to financial instability in the future.

Local Government Reorganisation: A Game-Changer?

Surrey County Council has been advocating for the creation of a unitary authority, which would absorb district and borough councils like EEBC. This move could:

- Reduce Bureaucratic Costs - Eliminating multiple layers of government could generate savings.
- Redistribute Resources - EEBC's financial issues might be alleviated if its budget were merged with Surrey's broader funding pool.
- Dilute Local Control - While cost efficiencies could be achieved, decision-making might shift away from community-focused governance.

If reorganisation proceeds, EEBC's financial crisis may become a moot point as budget planning is absorbed into the county-wide strategy. However, if the process is delayed or abandoned, the borough must act independently to avoid financial distress.

Conclusion: A Crisis in the Making?

While the Council insists its 2025/26 budget is balanced, the financial report confirms a growing structural deficit, aligning with Cllr Coley's warnings. The reliance on property income, shrinking government support, and an increasing budget gap suggest that by 2026, tough financial choices will be inevitable.

Cllr Coley's warnings are not entirely unfounded, but the financial data suggests that EEBC is not yet on the brink of insolvency. The real risk lies in the structural deficit and growing debt burden, which must be addressed through a combination of revenue generation, cost-cutting, and strategic planning.

The key question remains: What is the Council's plan beyond short-term fixes? Without a comprehensive long-term strategy, the borough may indeed be heading towards the financial cliff that Cllr Coley has predicted.

Related reports:

Prominent Residents Association Councillor leaves the fold

Epsom & Ewell Full Council Meeting: Budget Approved Amid Debate

The Plot of Gunpowder in Worcester Park

15 February 2025



Unearthing History: Worcester Park's Gunpowder Mills Rediscovered

For centuries, the quiet banks of the Hogsmill River at Old Malden Lane, Worcester Park, concealed a remarkable piece of Surrey's industrial past. The site of the former Worcester Park Gunpowder Mills, which operated in the 18th and 19th centuries, has recently been brought to light thanks to an unexpected archaeological discovery during a housing development project.

This fascinating chapter in local history was uncovered through the work of Surrey County Council's Historic Environment Planning Team, led by Nigel Randall, in partnership with Cotswold Archaeology. Their findings tell a story of industrial ingenuity, featuring cutting-edge engineering by John Smeaton, the 'father of civil engineering', and contributions from the renowned inventor James Watt.

An Unexpected Discovery

The site, long designated as an Area of High Archaeological Potential, had been a haulage yard for the past 40 years before its purchase by developers Taylor Wimpey. On the surface, it appeared unremarkable—concrete hardstanding, rough ground, and piles of demolition rubble. An initial archaeological assessment in 2018 noted the high potential for remains from the gunpowder mills but suggested they would likely be fragmented due to modern disturbances.

When planning permission was granted, it included a condition requiring archaeological investigation before construction began. What followed was a revelation: instead of minor remains, archaeologists uncovered substantial structures, including two gunpowder 'incorporating' mills, a sophisticated water management system, and a network of subterranean brick-built culverts.

A Hub of Industrial Innovation

The Worcester Park Gunpowder Mills played a crucial role in Britain's industrial heritage. Designed in 1771 by John Smeaton, the mills incorporated advanced engineering to power their operations. At the same time, James Watt was commissioned to develop a steam engine to pump increased volumes of water from the Hogsmill River—an indication of the site's significance at the height of its production.

Balancing Preservation with Development

Faced with such an important discovery, a collaborative approach between the developers and archaeologists ensured that as much of the site as possible could be recorded and preserved. The layout of the housing development was adjusted to avoid major disruption to the mill structures. However, due to safety concerns, some elements had to be carefully dismantled, while others were preserved beneath the new development.

To document and share this discovery, Cotswold Archaeology created a detailed 3D model of one of the incorporating mills, alongside a short video that brings the site's history to life. These resources provide a valuable opportunity for the public to engage with Surrey's industrial past and appreciate the ingenuity of 18th-century engineering.

A Lesson in Hindsight

Reflecting on the excavation, the project's lead archaeologist acknowledges that had an earlier trial trench evaluation been conducted, more could have been done to adapt the development to preserve these historical remains. However, the funding generated by the project enabled a comprehensive archaeological investigation, ensuring that this significant chapter in local history is documented and remembered.

For those interested in delving deeper into the story of Worcester Park's gunpowder mills, further details and the 3D model can be accessed through Cotswold Archaeology's online resources.

The uncovering of these historic structures serves as a reminder of the rich heritage hidden beneath our feet—and the importance of balancing development with the preservation of our past.

Acknowledgements: This article is based on research conducted by **Nigel Randall** of Surrey County Council's Historic Environment Planning Team and the **Surrey History Centre**. We extend our thanks for their work and permission to share this story. For further information, contact heritageconsultations@surreycc.gov.uk.

Many many more fascinating stories from Surrey's rich and varied heritage can be found on the Surrey History Centre website: <https://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/>

Image: An aerial view of the main excavation looking south-west. It shows the two mill structures and the brick culverts that supplied the water to power them and returned it to the Hogsmill (photo courtesy of Cotswold Archaeology and Aerial-Cam).

Ex-Council Officers under investigation for Woking's £2 billion debt

15 February 2025



Two former officers at Woking Borough Council are being investigated over their roles in Woking Borough Council's bankruptcy. The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has confirmed that it is looking into the "professional standards" of two "individual accountants" in respect of Woking Borough Council's operations and investment activities for the financial years ended 31 March 2017 to 31 March 2023.

While the FRC has not identified the two people involved, former CEO Ray Morgan has confirmed to the Local Democracy Reporting Service he is being investigated. The Guardian has named the other as Leigh Clarke, who was the council's chief financial officer until 2023. Shortly after her departure the council's interim section 151 officer declared Woking bankrupt with debts of more than £2 billion.

Since then the council has had to cut huge numbers of jobs, increased its share of tax by 10 per cent and slashed funding to services and facilities. It is the second time the FRC has investigated council officers. In January 2024 it began an investigation into a former member at Thurrock Council after that authority admitted to a £469m budget black hole.

If that is any indication of timescales, it could easily be more than a year before a decision is reached in Woking. FRC sanctioning powers range from issuing unlimited fines down to a slap on the wrist. It can also strip people of their membership of professional bodies.

Both Ray Morgan and Leigh Clarke were named in the Grant Thornton report published on Tuesday, November 5 that examined the scale of Woking's borrowing. The report found a "long and atypical history of borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board" ran between 1999 and 2020.

Borrowing accelerated rapidly between 2016 and 2019 - primarily to fund regeneration projects such as Victoria Place and Sheerwater but also to cover running costs at its companies as well as loans to a private school. The Grant Thornton report read: "There was a strong message, over a period of many years, from the former CEO, Ray Morgan, that if debt could be serviced it was possible to borrow as much as the council wished, for whatever purposes it chose."

Will Forster said: "As Woking's MP, I've called for those who effectively bankrupted our local council to be held to account. Pleased to see that the Financial Reporting Council, the UK's accounting watchdog, is investigating Ray Morgan and Leigh Clarke, two former senior council figures."

Responding to the news, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Leader of Woking Borough Council, said: "Since the council fully accepted the recommendations of the independent Grant Thornton public interest report, Government-appointed commissioners overseeing Woking Borough Council's financial recovery have been liaising with relevant professional bodies.

"As a result, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has confirmed investigations into the conduct of two former employees.

"Woking residents deserve complete transparency and for those responsible for the borough's financial issues to be held accountable. We will therefore do whatever we can to assist the FRC in their investigations."

The FRC statement read: "This press notice concerns the opening of an investigation into the relevant individuals. The investigation does not relate to any persons or entities other than the relevant individuals and it would not be fair to treat any part of this announcement as constituting or evidencing an investigation into any other persons or entities.

"The Financial Reporting Council has commenced an investigation under the Accountancy Scheme into the conduct of two individual accountants in relation to their compliance with governance, reporting, regulations and professional standards in respect of Woking Borough Council's operations and investment activities for the financial years ended 31 March 2017 to 31 March 2023.

"The individuals are no longer employed by the council. The decision was made at a meeting of the FRC's conduct committee on 17 December 2024. The investigation will be conducted by the FRC's executive counsel."

Prominent Residents Association Councillor leaves the fold

15 February 2025



Councillor **Alex Coley**, who has represented Ruxley Ward in Ewell for seven years, has announced his resignation from the ruling Residents' Association (RA) group, opting to serve as an Independent councillor. In his resignation letter addressed to RA Group Chair **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) on 11 February 2025, Cllr Coley expressed deep concerns about the council's financial trajectory and his inability to support the proposed 2025/26 budget.

Throughout his tenure, Cllr Coley has been instrumental in advancing several key initiatives, including the Climate Change Action Plan, the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy, and the Community Safety Strategy. He also played a pivotal role in enhancing governance and transparency as Vice Chair of Audit & Scrutiny and of Standards & Constitution.

He also stood as an independent candidate in the last election for Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner receiving a highly creditable 16% (42,062) of the vote being just a little less than half the votes cast for the Conservative Party incumbent Lisa Townsend.

He was an independent minded Councillor on 22nd March 2023 when he walked out of a Full Council meeting protesting the ruling group's pause progressing the Local Plan.

His recent efforts to promote Epsom & Ewell as a cultural and creative destination led him to uncover unsettling truths about the council's finances and property management. "In my pursuit of this goal, I have uncovered many unhappy truths about our finances and the properties we own and operate for the benefit of our residents," he stated in his letter.

Cllr Coley voiced apprehension about the council's financial sustainability, indicating that he believes the council may face insolvency by 2026. "I have thought for some time that 2026 is the year this Council runs out of money," he remarked, highlighting a lack of clarity and planning for this potential outcome.

The RA group has maintained majority control of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council since its formation in 1937. In the 2023 local elections, the RA secured 26 out of 35 seats, reaffirming its dominant position. Despite this longstanding control, the council has faced financial challenges. In February 2021, RA leader Eber Kington acknowledged a £5.8 million deficit, underscoring the fiscal difficulties confronting the council.

Cllr Coley's departure from the RA group underscores the ongoing concerns about the council's financial health and the need for transparent and effective fiscal management. As he transitions to an Independent role, he remains committed to collaborating with residents' groups to serve the best interests of the community.

The council approved the 2025/26 budget. The budget includes a 2.98% increase in the borough council portion of council tax, equating to an additional £6.75 per year for the average Band D property. Despite this increase, Epsom & Ewell's council tax remains below the average for Surrey.

Related reports:

[Epsom & Ewell Full Council Meeting: Budget Approved Amid Debate](#)

[Planning or pantomime? Councillors press pause on Plan.](#)

Epsom complainant changes Surrey police procedure

15 February 2025



Surrey Police Accepts Recommendation to Improve Retention of Body-Worn Video Evidence in Complaints

Surrey Police has agreed to implement a key recommendation from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) following a complaint by an Epsom resident regarding the retention of body-worn video (BWV) footage in police complaints.

The issue arose from an incident on 12 April 2023, when the complainant was filmed by a police officer, PC Scruby, during a meeting at his mother’s address. The complainant alleged that he was not informed he was being recorded until ten minutes into their interaction. He later raised concerns that the footage, which he believed could substantiate his account, had been deleted under Surrey Police’s 28-day evidence retention policy before it could be considered in his complaint.

After being dissatisfied with the response from Surrey Police’s Professional Standards Department (PSD) in October 2024, the complainant appealed to the OPCC. The OPCC conducted a review and found that Surrey Police’s service was acceptable in 18 out of 19 points raised in the complaint. However, it upheld one element of the complaint, determining that the complaint handler had failed to properly investigate the complainant’s concerns regarding what the officer had said during the meeting.

The review confirmed that the interaction had been recorded on BWV, but the footage was not secured by Surrey Police despite the complaint being made the following day on 13 April 2023. As a result, in line with the force’s BWV policy, the footage was automatically deleted from the system without being saved, rendering it unavailable as evidence in the complaint process.

In response to the case, the OPCC issued a recommendation that complaint handlers should secure any BWV footage providing evidence in a complaint against police at the earliest opportunity and, in any case, within 28 days of the alleged incident. This measure is aimed at closing a procedural gap that may hinder transparency and accountability in police investigations.

The complainant expressed frustration over the deletion of potentially valuable evidence, stating: “It is concerning that evidence which could clarify what happened during my interaction with the officer was destroyed. I welcome the OPCC’s recognition that procedural changes are needed.”

The OPCC’s report also addressed broader concerns raised in the complaint, including allegations of inadequate communication and procedural mishandling by PSD. While it found that Surrey Police’s actions were generally in line with existing procedures, the recommendation for improved evidence retention was seen as a necessary step to enhance the fairness and thoroughness of future complaint investigations.

Surrey Police confirmed that it accepted the recommendation in full on 20 January 2025, with the PSD now in the process of implementing the change.

This development highlights ongoing efforts to ensure greater accountability and efficiency in police complaint handling, reinforcing public trust in the system.

Image: West Midlands Police - CC BY-SA 2.0

Surrey County Council’s Climate Change Progress: Successes, Setbacks, and the Road Ahead

15 February 2025



Surrey County Council (SCC) has made notable strides in its efforts to combat climate change, cutting its own carbon emissions by 38% since 2019. However, despite significant progress, challenges remain, particularly in securing funding and maintaining the momentum needed to achieve net zero by 2030 as an organisation and 2050 for the wider county.

Achievements: Measurable Gains in Emissions Reductions

SCC's third annual Climate Change Delivery Plan assessment highlights a range of accomplishments across various sectors. Since 2019, the county has:

- Reduced its yearly emissions by 1 million tonnes.
- Retrofitted nine council buildings and increased renewable energy capacity by 0.5 megawatts.
- Converted nearly 100% of its streetlights to LEDs, achieving a 75% reduction in emissions from street lighting.
- Upgraded over 3,000 homes to improve energy efficiency.
- Installed 14MW of additional solar power—enough to power 9,000 households.
- Planted 500,000 trees as part of a broader sustainability drive.
- Offered 500 green skills courses to improve employment opportunities in eco-friendly industries.

These efforts have collectively helped residents, businesses, and the public sector save approximately £18 million per year in energy costs.

Challenges: Where Progress Falls Short

Despite these commendable efforts, SCC faces several hurdles that could derail its long-term sustainability plans. Funding constraints, supply chain issues, and the cost of implementing further green initiatives pose serious challenges. The county remains at risk of falling behind on its ambitious targets without additional investment and governmental support.

According to SCC's Net Zero Progress Report, while the county remains generally on track, six out of its twelve borough and district councils have seen an increase in emissions. Moreover, transport remains a significant contributor to carbon output, with Surrey's transport-related emissions making up 44% of the county's total emissions—well above the national average of 29%. The report suggests that while cycling and walking rates have increased, they have not been sufficient to significantly reduce private vehicle use.

SCC's building decarbonisation efforts also face hurdles, with only eight buildings retrofitted against an anticipated 36 by 2025. Similarly, while 39 low-carbon vehicles have been introduced into the council's fleet, this falls well short of the 196 needed by 2025. The delay in installing EV charging points across council sites has further slowed fleet decarbonisation.

How Does SCC Compare to the Best in the Country?

One of the standout local authorities in climate action in the UK is Nottingham City Council, which has set a 2028 net-zero target—two years ahead of SCC's goal. Nottingham has implemented a city-wide district heating system powered by waste incineration, extensive home insulation programmes, and one of the most ambitious municipal renewable energy strategies in the UK. Nottingham has also successfully expanded its cycle network and introduced a fleet of electric buses.

By comparison, Surrey's efforts in public transport and active travel have been less effective. While SCC has made progress with bus electrification (with 16 ultra-low-emission vehicles introduced so far), it still lags behind other councils in deploying public transport solutions at scale. The lack of effective incentives to transition away from car dependency further limits its impact.

The Road Ahead: Priorities for SCC

SCC has outlined several key priorities for the next phase of its climate strategy:

1. **Expanding Renewable Energy:** Increasing rooftop solar on council buildings and exploring carbon offsetting options where direct emissions reductions are challenging.
2. **Improving Home Energy Efficiency:** Expanding the Warm Welcome initiative and continuing the Solar Together programme to help residents transition to renewable energy.
3. **Decarbonising Public Transport:** Expanding electric vehicle charging infrastructure and investing in cleaner public transport solutions.
4. **Boosting Green Skills and Jobs:** Strengthening partnerships with institutions like the University of Surrey to create more opportunities in the green economy.
5. **Protecting Nature and Climate Adaptation:** Implementing flood resilience measures, developing biodiversity recovery plans, and ensuring green spaces are protected.
6. **Securing National Government Support:** Lobbying for greater investment in local sustainability projects and improvements to infrastructure.

Surrey County Council has made strong initial progress in reducing emissions and implementing sustainability initiatives, but serious risks remain. Without significant additional funding and structural improvements—especially in transport, building efficiency, and energy production—there is a real possibility that SCC may fall short of its ambitious targets.

Ultimately, SCC's ability to meet its targets will depend on whether it can maintain momentum in its existing initiatives

while addressing the gaps that still threaten its long-term vision of a net-zero Surrey.

Related reports:

Epsom and Ewell adopts new Climate Action Plan

Climate motion sparks energetic debate in Council

Epsom & Ewell Full Council Meeting: Budget Approved Amid Debate

15 February 2025



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council held a full council meeting on 11 February 2025, where key issues, including the approval of the council's budget, the mayor's upcoming engagements, and urgent council business, were discussed.

Mayor's Address

The meeting opened with prayers led by Reverend Esther Holly Hunt, followed by an address from the Mayor, Cllr **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford) who reflected on recent civic events, including the 50th anniversary of the Epsom and Ewell Talking Newspaper, the 100th anniversary of the Epsom Rotary Club, and the forthcoming 80th anniversary of VE Day. The Mayor also highlighted the upcoming Mayor's Ball at Epsom College and the opening of the newly step-free Stoneleigh Station.

Budget Debate and Approval

A crucial part of the meeting was the discussion of the council's budget for 2025-26. Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA Town), Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee, presented the budget, outlining the financial challenges faced by the borough, including homelessness, climate change policies, and government funding uncertainties.

The opposition groups, including the Liberal Democrats, Labour, and the Conservatives, expressed concerns over housing shortages, procurement processes, and local plan delays. Councillor **Alison Kelly** of the Liberal Democrat group (Stamford) criticised the council's lack of action in addressing social housing and discretionary housing payments. Labour Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Court) challenged the proposed council tax increase, arguing that it would place an undue burden on residents. Meanwhile, the Conservatives called for greater scrutiny of council spending and planning decisions.

Many councillors who voted against the budget voiced concerns over the council's financial priorities. Labour representatives particularly highlighted the continued reliance on temporary accommodation for those facing homelessness, arguing that the budget did not allocate enough funding to long-term housing solutions. The Liberal Democrats criticised the slow progress on infrastructure projects and the perceived lack of transparency in procurement decisions. The Conservative group, on the other hand, raised issues regarding planning enforcement and the handling of the local plan, arguing that the administration was failing to provide long-term economic sustainability for the borough.

Some opposition members also questioned the feasibility of the proposed budget adjustments, warning that future financial strains could lead to service reductions or higher tax burdens in the coming years. They argued that without a more robust financial plan, the council risked further instability, particularly in areas such as waste management, policing support, and community welfare.

Following the debate, the budget was put to a recorded vote and was approved, despite opposition from some eleven councillors including several Residents Association members against 23 who voted to pass the budget.

Withdrawal of Motion

A motion initially set for discussion was withdrawn at the request of Councillor Dallen. The motion pertained to potential by-election arrangements and was removed following guidance from Surrey County Council, which advised that any by-elections held before May 2026 would need to be conducted under existing boundaries.

Confidential Discussions

Towards the end of the meeting, the council entered a closed session to discuss an urgent item containing exempt

information, leading to the exclusion of the press and public.

The meeting highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council as it works to balance financial constraints with the needs of local residents. The approval of the budget ensures continued funding for essential services, though the opposition has signalled that they will continue to scrutinise council decisions closely.

Funding for new apprenticeships now available to Surrey businesses

15 February 2025



Businesses can grow their workforce and boost productivity in just a few clicks by getting an apprenticeship funded by Surrey County Council.

As part of the Apprenticeship Levy Transfer Scheme, small and medium enterprises across the county can get fully funded support to train local talent.

Apprenticeships are widely recognised as a cost-effective way to recruit, improving diversity and filling skills gaps. In time, they can also help businesses grow, improve employee retention and support the wider economy.

Funding is available to pay for the training of dozens of new apprenticeships across the county. It is open to all businesses in Surrey and allocated on a first come, first served basis - meaning those interested should apply swiftly via the Surrey County Council website.

For those unsure of the process, a free 45-minute webinar will be hosted by the Council's Business Surrey service on February 26. Reserve your space today to discover more about modern-day apprenticeships and how businesses can access funding.

One Surrey organisation that has benefited already from the scheme is Sight for Surrey, a charity that provides specialist support for people in Surrey with sensory loss. Diane Smith, Head of Adult Services says:

"We have used the levy to support internal succession for those wanting to pursue a career in Social Work from the Deaf Community. More recently we used the levy to support three new apprentices in roles that are recognised to be under resourced across the sector nationally as well as in Surrey.

"The process of completing the Levy Transfer scheme was simple and smooth due to the responsive support from the Council. Our Deaf Services Social Worker has recently graduated from Kingston University and our three new apprentices are settled and progressing well in their new careers! All making an impact for residents of the Surrey community."

The call comes in National Apprenticeship Week (February 10 to 16), which is a national celebration of the opportunities presented by the training schemes.

According to government figures, benefits of apprenticeships include:

96% of employers report benefits to their business

employers make a net gain of between £2,500 and £18,000 per apprentice during their training period

80% of businesses see a significant increase in employee retention

Almost two-thirds of all UK apprenticeships in the last year have been funded by the apprenticeship levy.

This is a pool of funding made available by large employers, such as the Council, to make apprenticeships more accessible to SMEs. The Council wants as many local residents and businesses to benefit from the scheme as possible - which is why the online process can be completed in a matter of minutes.

Matt Furniss, the Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport, and Economic Growth, emphasised the council's commitment to providing opportunities for all. He said: "Apprenticeships are a proven cost-effective way to recruit which benefit businesses and employees, as well as the broader economy. As an organisation we are committed to providing opportunities to all of our residents, which includes creating a skilled workforce for the future. "The levy transfer scheme is a fantastic way for SMEs to access funding to develop and grow their workforce - which is why I encourage them to discover more about this fantastic opportunity."

For more information on how to apply for the Apprenticeship Levy and to start the process of recruiting talented apprentices, visit https://www.businesssurrey.co.uk/workforce/apprenticeship_levy/

Mega Surrey council ruled out as leader says it would ‘lack accountability’

15 February 2025



Council leaders across Surrey have ruled out making the county a single mega authority. The agreement was reached during a meeting on February 7, attended by leaders from all eleven district and borough councils.

The government confirmed last week that Surrey is among the first areas to take part in devolution to simplify and streamline local government. Elections have also been postponed until at least 2026 as part of the process.

Catherine Sayer, Leader of Tandridge District Council, said: “I am delighted we have been able to rule out proposing a single unitary which I believe would have been too large and so lack accountability to residents.”

Two-tier systems of borough and county councils could be thrown away with single unitary authorities created instead. The government argues this would not only be more cost effective but also shift power away from Westminster and towards local people.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, who was unable to attend last week’s meeting, said: “The government’s White Paper sets out their ambition to create strategic combined authorities under mayoral devolution, and within Surrey’s geography a single unitary wouldn’t meet that criteria.”

A statement from the Surrey Leaders LGR Steering Group said it “remain[s] committed to working together towards submitting one bid for the County”.

Options still on the table include Surrey being made up of two or three smaller council regions, with possibly an elected mayor overseeing the whole county. Last week Spelthorne councillors voted on their preferred make-up of councils depending on whether Surrey would be split into two or three.

But leaders across the political divide have warned shrewd councils should not be flattened by neighbouring council’s crushing debts. Leader of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Richard Biggs, and Leader of Elmbridge Borough Council, Mike Rollings, as well as Cllr Sayer (Tandridge) have raised alarm at being forced to pick up the tab of other councils.

Council leaders are aiming to meet weekly to develop an interim proposal, in line with government criteria, to be submitted by 21 March with a full proposal to follow by 9 May.

Surrey leading the shout: “Keep the noise down will you!”

15 February 2025



An interdisciplinary network of engineers, policymakers, industry stakeholders and social scientists, led by the University of Surrey, will take on one of the UK’s most overlooked environmental challenges: noise pollution.

From the constant hum of road traffic to the thousands of flights in and out of UK airports, noise awareness in our modern world often fades into the background – but it carries significant consequences for both human health and wildlife. Noise Network Plus will focus on promoting conscious design processes to create quieter products, buildings and transportation systems – with the aim of reducing noise pollution and building a healthier environment over the next 10-15 years.

Professor Mark Plumbley, project lead and Professor of Signal Processing at the University of Surrey’s Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing (CVSSP), said:

“Noise is a frequently neglected pollutant, but it has a big impact on health, society and the environment. For example, road noise can lead to sleep disturbance and heart disease, costing £7-10 billion each year in England alone. Once noise is out there, it is really hard to remove. We need to re-think how we design noise from the start.”

Awarded more than £1.8 million in funding, Noise Network Plus is one of six research projects to receive a share of £10 million from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). Together they form part of its wider community engagement initiative to address ‘Tomorrow’s Engineering Research Challenges’ (TERC), launched today (11th February), which focuses on tackling the most pressing issues facing the engineering sector.

Professor Abigail Bristow from the University of Surrey, said:

“We’re at a pivotal moment in time where our environment is under threat, but we have the technology and expertise to make meaningful changes. Our mission-oriented research and innovation network will look to adopt a systems-thinking approach, addressing the root causes of noise and understanding its far-reaching impacts.”

A collaboration between the University of Surrey, City St George’s University of London, the University of Bath, and the University of Salford, Noise Network Plus aims to build unprecedented research capabilities to tackle the complex challenge of reducing noise and its impacts on people, the environment and the economy. Bringing together diverse teams and stakeholders, the initiative will promote inclusive dialogue and co-design innovative solutions.

Alan Hunter, Professor in Autonomous Systems based in the University of Bath’s Department of Mechanical Engineering, will lead the network’s efforts on underwater noise and artificial intelligence. This will include research into the effects of noise created by human activities at sea and improving the resilience of uncrewed underwater vehicles to noise. Professor Hunter said:

“The ocean is a noisy place, and a lot of the tools and technologies we rely on to deliver services either increase noise levels or are affected by noise. Taking oceanographic measurements, measuring marine wildlife populations, or inspecting underwater infrastructure, are all examples of activities affected by noise and of which we need to build a better understanding.”

Professor Antonio Torija Martinez and Dr Simone Graetzer are co-leads on the project at the University of Salford’s Acoustic Research Centre. Professor Martinez said:

“As the UK moves toward Net Zero, the adoption of sustainable energy and emerging technologies - such as wind turbines and drones - will introduce new sources of noise, fundamentally reshaping our soundscapes. This offers us a unique opportunity for a fresh start and through our initiative, we aim to transform the way noise is managed, embedding innovative solutions into engineering design and policy.”

Professor Charlotte Clark, Professor of Environmental Epidemiology in the Population Health Research Institute at City St George’s, University of London, said:

“This is a rare and timely opportunity to form multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams to develop engineering solutions addressing the problem of noise effects on health. We know that noise affects health, but we know little about how to mitigate the problem. The missions developed in the Noise Network Plus have the potential to step up mitigation efforts that will translate into major, long-term public health gains.”

The launch of Noise Network Plus will take place on 18th March at Prince Philip House, the home of the Royal Academy of Engineering, in London. The event will bring together a cross-section of people from engineering and other disciplines including researchers, industry, professional institutions, policymakers, charities, and other stakeholders, to identify the challenges that need to be addressed, and plan how the Network can work to address these challenges.

Professor Adrian Hilton, Director of the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI and CVSSP, added:

“Noise Network Plus represents a significant step towards addressing an often-overlooked pollutant and its detrimental impact on people. This interdisciplinary people-centred approach aims to tackle the complex challenges of noise in our modern world and develop innovative solutions for quieter and healthier communities.”

Epsom & Ewell Council not much in the red but too much in the pink!

15 February 2025



Governance Failing Exposed by External Audit Findings

The Audit and Scrutiny Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council convened on 6th February 2025, where the External Audit Report by Grant Thornton ignited a heated debate over transparency, governance, and the Council's use of confidential "pink papers". Against the background of relative positive news on the accounts and budgets the meeting focussed on the culture of secrecy over decision-making.

The external auditors highlighted a culture of secrecy, citing too many decisions being taken in private and a lack of openness in decision-making. Opposition Councillors Kate Chinn, Chris Ames and James Lawrence strongly criticised the Council's handling of transparency, while the Council's leadership attempted to downplay the concerns, insisting that governance processes were robust.

The External Audit Report: A Damning Verdict on Transparency

The Grant Thornton audit report drew heavily on a Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review, which criticised the Council's decision-making culture. The report highlighted that:

- "Too many decisions are being made under part two as a media management strategy."
- There is a "lack of transparency" in governance structures.
- The Council needed to demonstrate clearer and more open decision-making.

These findings were met with stark reactions from opposition councillors, who argued that the Council was withholding information from elected members and the public.

Councillor Kate Chinn: "Stop the Navel-Gazing"

Before the committee formally discussed Item 4: External Audit, Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Labour, Court Ward) made a strong opening statement, focusing on the governance failures exposed by the auditors. She highlighted:

"Throughout their report, Grant Thornton noted the LGA report stating a culture of secrecy, noting a lack of transparency, stating a culture of secrecy described by members and that too many decisions are being held behind closed doors."

Chinn criticised the ruling administration for focusing on internal restructuring, particularly the proposal to separate audit and scrutiny functions, rather than addressing substantive transparency issues. She stated:

"The ruling group has chosen to focus as a priority on the LGA recommendation to decouple audit and scrutiny. This is a decision that was already planted in council by the political leadership as a direction of travel, and I'm quite sure this is not a priority for the residents of Epsom and Ewell facing so many cost-of-living challenges."

She urged the Council to move beyond constitutional tinkering and focus on supporting frontline services:

"In view of the move to a unitary authority, the Council should stop spending so much time on internal matters—no more tweaking the constitution or fiddling about with the functions of a soon-to-be different committee. It's just become navel-gazing."

Councillor Chris Ames Challenges "Pink Paper" Secrecy

The overuse of confidential "pink papers" (private reports) became a central point of contention, with Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) raising concerns over the council's reliance on closed-door discussions.

He directly challenged the administration on whether they were deliberately using "part two" rules to restrict public access:

"Are you using part two to be a euphemism for going into a closed session? Because that's not my understanding of what part two means..... There is a withheld report here. It's Appendix Two. It's quite clear. It says on both the public pack and in item 13."

Chair **Steve McCormick** Chair of the Committee (RA Woodcote and Langley) defended the Council's approach, arguing that some reports contained sensitive financial details:

"If you start to ask questions on that, then we will have to go into part two. We will have to basically stop the feed. And once we go into part two, we can't come out."

However, Ames remained sceptical, pressing for clear definitions of what was truly confidential and what was being unnecessarily withheld. He questioned whether decisions should be debated in secret unless absolutely necessary: "My

question is, are we using the word Part Two consistently and accurately? Because it says item 13 and it says it's on the public pack."

Adding to this transparency row, Councillor **Alex Coley** (RA Ruxley) reported that he was unable to access the part two documents on the Council's internal system, ModGov:

"I'm not actually able to access the part two items in ModGov. So that's perhaps why there's been some confusion. I can't get to them."

Councillor James Lawrence: "A Transparency Crisis"

In one of the most scathing criticisms of the evening, Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College Ward) said that his own experiences confirmed that the Council had a serious transparency problem. He declared:

"Quite frankly, my own experience of transparency at the Council is not great."

He pointed to several key examples where he felt information was deliberately restricted:

1. The Local Plan Process: "I've struggled to be involved at all in the local plan process. The entire time I've been elected as a councillor, it has not come to a public committee until right before it went to full council.....If I'm struggling as a councillor, my goodness, what do we think residents are struggling to see?"
2. The Town Hall Move (£7m Project): "Still don't really know why that was in part two.....Then of course we had the well-prepared, very slick PR statement to go out after, to give the impression to residents that there were no problems, that it's all clean sailing."
3. The Hook Road Arena Plan: "I remember I saw that appear in the Local Plan documents, and I emailed in questions about that. Nothing. Nothing back."
4. Access to Audit Reports: "Having my own struggles to get hold of an audit report as a member of audit and scrutiny—it's not a very good sign.....Of all the people to be struggling to get hold of an audit report, it shouldn't be someone on the Audit and Scrutiny Committee."

Council's Response: A Dismissive Attitude?

The Council's official response to the audit findings did not acknowledge any fundamental governance failures. Instead, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) issued a brief statement, saying: "SLT believes the Council is transparent in its reporting and through Committees."

Lawrence ridiculed the response, stating: "My impression of the management response is essentially: Don't care. It's already transparent enough."

A pragmatic attitude from Councillor Alan Williamson

Cllr **Alan Williamson** (RA West Ewell) struck a pragmatic tone, questioning whether the Council should devote energy to internal reforms when local government reorganisation was imminent. He remarked:

"Obviously, the one area where there is an element of concern from the external auditors is governance and transparency. Now, this is, in my mind, an issue of culture rather than performance..... The whole focus of this Council is going to be the impending local government reorganisation, and to expect it to change its culture in the next year or two is somewhat implausible."

He suggested that the Council's priorities should shift towards ensuring stability during the transition rather than engaging in lengthy internal governance debates.

A Governance Crisis?

The Audit and Scrutiny Committee meeting exposed deep divisions within the Council. While external auditors and opposition councillors raised legitimate concerns about secrecy and accountability, the administration remained largely dismissive of these criticisms.

As Councillor Lawrence bluntly put it: "If I'm struggling as a councillor to access this information, what hope do our residents have?"

With local government reorganisation looming, the Council faces mounting pressure to reform its decision-making processes—but the meeting made clear that no immediate action is planned.

Whether transparency will improve or whether secrecy will remain embedded in the Council's culture remains to be seen.

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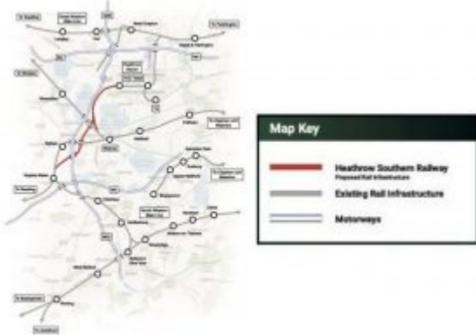
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“Audit and Scrutiny” under scrutiny

Annual audit of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Surrey’s new rail link to Heathrow?

15 February 2025



Plans for a new railway connecting Surrey to Heathrow and beyond have resurfaced as the track’s backers welcomed government support for a third runway at the airport. The line, called the Heathrow Southern Railway (HSR), is a privately financed proposal to link towns in Surrey to one of the world’s busiest airports.

If built, it would operate between Heathrow and London Waterloo via Staines. There would also be direct trains from the airport to Woking and Guildford, before carrying on to the south coast. Heathrow Southern Railway said it also would provide for an extension of the Elizabeth Line to Staines.

Baroness Jo Valentine, the group’s chairperson, said: “The UK Government has set a bold agenda for growth with its support for a third runway at Heathrow Airport. Our railway enhances that growth by increasing connectivity and reducing surface emissions. These benefits accrue with a two runway airport but will be enhanced with an additional runway. We look forward to working with all partners to make this a reality.”

Mark Livock, chief executive, added: “The new Government has expressed interest in finding ways to harness private sector finance in making the delivery of major infrastructure schemes more affordable. Heathrow Southern Railway has a depth of experience in creating opportunities for private investment that could deliver tangible benefits to the UK, and southern rail access to Heathrow would positively transform public transport connectivity to Europe’s busiest airport.”

The group estimates that the new route would cut about millions of road journeys - with many of those from the M25. They added: “Our construction plans minimise the impact on neighbouring communities by providing a route mainly in tunnel and using only electric trains. Unlike the previous “Airtrack” proposals, HSR avoids level crossings in the Egham area.”

An HSR spokesperson said: “Our proposed route starts at Heathrow’s Terminal 5 station and is intended to run mainly in tunnel and be electrified to minimise environmental impact. It rises to the surface to connect to the existing railway near Staines and Virginia Water.”

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[Heathrow expansion reaction](#)

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[Hsr Proposed Route \(Image Heathrow Southern Rail\)](#)

Guildford Borough Council keeps its lights on

15 February 2025



A Surrey council may have “kept the lights on” and balanced the budget this year but trouble could be looming. The pessimistic warning came during the budget meeting as councillors were told they will have to make tough decisions in the future.

Members of Guildford Borough Council signed off a balanced 2025/26 budget this week despite an ‘unkind’ settlement from the government leaving levels of funding largely unchanged from the previous year. Councillors from all parties praised officers and finance bosses for turning Guildford’s accounts around in the last two years. The Surrey borough was

nearing bankruptcy in 2023 with the strain from rising historical debts.

But all is not as rosy as it seems. Each year Guildford Borough Council must find £2m worth of savings just to keep afloat and cover borrowing costs for its “ambitious” capital programme. The projected budget gap is expected to grow from 0 in 2025 to potentially £5.9 million in four years (2028/29) with at least an £1.6 million increase every year. Service costs from the council are projected to rise from £16.4 million in 2025/26 to potentially £20.3m in 2028/29.

Over the next five years, Cllr Richard Lucas (Lead for Finance and Property) explained the requirement for Guildford to pay back its escalating debt represents a “major financial challenge”. He said: “Each year we will have to find another £2m worth of savings just to stay still and cover our borrowing costs increasing.”

However, the council’s plan for paying back debts for building projects does not include the Weyside Urban Village scheme. A hugely ambitious undertaking, the Weyside Urban Village project is the council’s regeneration scheme aiming to build 1,500 homes. The borrowing costs, or interest, for the project are due after 2029 and so are not incorporated into the medium term financial plan.

Despite work being underway, the council still has not quite figured out how it’s going to foot the bill. Although it may seem a ‘future problem’, councillors will decide how they are going to finance the project in March.

“If anything is going to put the council back in the financial mire it is that,” said Cllr Patrick Oven. He said although he was very “committed” to the scheme, he “wondered whether we can afford it”.

Cllr Richard Lucas told the council the budget was balanced by “finding some savings within the services, increasing some fees and charges”. The Lead Councillor for Finance and Property added the main source of potential savings going forwards is from opportunities of collaboration with Waverley. The councils had recently claimed £600k has been saved in the local authority partnership between Guildford and Waverley.

National insurance increases took the biggest chunk of the council’s finances, hitting Guildford with around £1,000 per full time employee. Wage rises and inflation is also squeezing the council’s budget, demanding the increase in council tax by the maximum 2.99 per cent. Charges for council services are projected to increase by at least 3.75 per cent.

Non-ringfenced reserves for a rainy day sit at around £17.7m, well above the minimum 5% of general fund expenditure recommended.

Cllr Patrick Oven described the accounts as “an austerity budget”. Expenditure is reduced in 2025/26 but for the next four years spending “effectively falls off a cliff” with money dropping to about a third of the £111k promised this year. “But we can’t spend money we haven’t got,” he added.

Opponents still criticised the Liberal Democrat administration for a “lack of ambition” with the budget as no ‘rabbit out of the hat’ or exciting projects were revealed. Cllr Joss Bigmore said: “It’s really sad that we’re at this stage now where we’re going budget to budget trying to keep the lights on and that leaves so little discretion for any political ambition or choices.”

Guildford council has also agreed to undergo a ‘zero budgeting basis’ by looking at everything it does, covering its statutory duties and long-term priorities. Cllr Lucas said: “It inevitably means we will stop doing some things. There will be pain involved but we have £2m a year, each year, to find extra savings.”

Outside Guildford Borough Council’s HQ, Millmead House. (Credit: Guildford Borough Council)

Surrey’s flood defences and energy efficiency funding

15 February 2025



Funding for Surrey’s climate change programme has been reinstated after the county council received £1.5m more in government grants than it was expecting.

Surrey’s Greener Future’s programme is a climate change strategy that aims to reduce carbon emissions and make the county net-zero by 2050. Budget details had initially proposed to slash £0.5m from the Greener Future’s spreadsheet, as part of Surrey County Council’s identified £66.4m cuts it needs to make in 2025/26.

But the cuts will now be reversed after an amendment put forward by the Residents’ Association/Independents and the Green Party. Members unanimously agreed to the proposed changes to the budget at a full council meeting on February 4.

Cllr Catherine Powell said in the meeting: “Younger residents want a long-term focus which I don’t believe this budget

fully supports.” The Independent member for Farnham Residents said the funds will safeguard the “vital work on developing and embedding climate adaptation”.

Money reinvested back into the Greener Futures team can be used to develop and integrate climate adaptation policies such as flood defences, heat avoidance, and programmes to improve household energy efficiency. It also includes developing finance opportunities like natural capital and organising health initiatives.

Cllr Jonathan Essex (Green Party/ Redhill East), who initiated the amendment, said: “Now is the time to strengthen and extend, not water down, climate action across Surrey, so I am delighted that we have taken this step to continue tackling the climate emergency.

“Leadership by local councils, including here in Surrey, is vital to ensure that the health of the economy is defined by community well-being and sustainable living, not by growth at all costs.”

Cllr Powell added: “I firmly believe that climate change is not only real, but impacting Surrey and our residents and our businesses today.” She cited the multiple instances of flooding across Surrey last year which the Environmental Agency said would only happen once every 30 years in normal condition.

The agreed change was just one of five amendments the Green Party put forward to change the council’s budget, the rest were rejected. The others included creating a voluntary contribution fund for early intervention children services, closing the Your Fund Surrey programme, putting a transport scheme on hold and committing to a cross-party working group for SEND needs.

View from Little Misley, one of the fields set to have solar panels. (Credit: Guildford Borough Council planning documents)

Mole Valley setting a green belt development trend?

15 February 2025



Up to 200 new homes will be built on former green belt land despite fears they could overwhelm the already strained sewage system. Mole Valley District Council’s planning committee approved developer Thakeham’s vision for the 27-hectare site off Little Bookham Street on Wednesday, February 5. As well as the 200 homes, the plans will feature a community building, Gypsy and Traveller pitches, and public open space that the developers said would also open access to nearby ponds. Forty per cent of the homes would be affordable.

The site has been identified for development by the council’s local plan, but the application had drawn more than 300 objections. Residents speaking at the meeting raised concerns about raw sewage, as well as the impact on local children being pushed out of their school’s catchment area. Thames Water, however, raised no objections. Christine Milstead said: “Our green belt is definitely not Angela Rayner’s gray belt. We think this development will cause harm to the green belt and protected habitats. All residents have objected to surface water flooding, and there are springs all over this site. For years, residents have been pumping water off their patios to prevent their houses from flooding. When you get a lot of rain, water does not drain through permeable surfaces. Will the proposed infrastructure capture water from the rear of new properties, or will it just run down to Little Bookham Street?”

Speaking on behalf of the plans, Tristan Robinson, Thakeham’s director of external affairs, said Mole Valley was the fourth least affordable place to live in the country. He highlighted young couples struggling to afford housing and the 680 households on the waiting list. Despite the plans being voted through—by eight in favour, three against, and one abstention—Councillor Joanna Slater (Conservative; Leatherhead South) cautioned against setting a precedent for developing beyond what was laid out in the council’s local plan for green belt. Cllr Paul Kennedy (Liberal Democrats: Bookham East and Eastwick Park) also urged the committee to heed residents and environmental groups calling for the protection of the “precious unspoiled countryside.”

The new homes will be net carbon zero and feature a mix of one to four-bedroom properties. The developers aim to create 45 acres of open space and a new country park accessible to the wider community. Mr Robinson said: “After undertaking a comprehensive public consultation process for Land North West of Preston Farm, we are pleased to receive backing from Mole Valley District Council. The scheme includes 40 per cent affordable housing—something urgently needed locally—and significant new public open spaces for everyone to enjoy.”

Plans for 200 homes in Little Bookham (image Thakeham)

Surrey Uni leads research to replace plastic with paper for liquids

15 February 2025



A multimillion-pound research project, called SustaPack, aims to overcome manufacturing challenges for the next generation of sustainable, paper-based packaging for liquids. Backed by a £1 million grant from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) as part of UKRI's co-investing programme, packaging technology company Pulpex Ltd has joined forces with the University of Surrey to refine its manufacturing processes to provide a viable solution to plastic pollution.

Contributing matching support towards the project, Pulpex has already made significant strides in the development of its patented technology, which produces degradable bottles made from natural wood fibres. The packaging offers a sustainable alternative to traditional plastic materials and can be recycled in existing paper waste streams.

However, designing the next generation of production technology and materials requires novel and fundamental research to address current limitations, including new analytical techniques to improve product quality, optimising performance and reducing in-process imperfections.

Scott Winston, CEO at Pulpex, said:

"We're excited to strengthen our existing collaboration with the University of Surrey to enhance our technologies and processes. Our SustaPack partnership will help us advance safe, sustainable packaging solutions, enabling brand owners to meet Net-Zero targets. It gives consumers sustainable choices, delivers answers for brand owners, and enables supply chains and retailers to deliver their carbon footprint reduction goals - a priority for all."

A key feature of the packaging is its multi-layered barrier coating, which prevents contained liquid from leaking, as well as inward oxygen permeation, maintaining high-quality products for consumers. To create a step-change in the energy usage in methods used to apply these coatings, the researchers plan to develop innovative processes that consume less energy and water while increasing the shelf life of packaged goods.

Professor Joseph Keddie, from the University of Surrey's School of Mathematics and Physics, and Fellow of the Institute for Sustainability, said:

"Over the past couple of years, I have forged a close relationship with Pulpex as a Royal Society Industry Fellow, and I am enthusiastic about strengthening our ties through our SustaPack Partnership.

"Our aim here is to combine novel coating processes, mechanistic modelling, computer vision and artificial intelligence (AI) to establish a 'dry' spray coating process that deposits food-safe, degradable coatings. This technology, which isn't yet commercially available, will not only drive the next generation of packaging technology but will also contribute to a significant reduction in plastic pollution and lower carbon emissions from manufacturing."

A multi-disciplinary team of researchers will explore the feasibility of using thermal imaging to detect defects in wet coatings as they occur, enabling immediate corrections using AI. Multi-scale mechanistic models of the coating process will be employed to identify the sources of imperfections and non-uniformities and then eliminate them to ensure optimal packaging performance.

By applying innovative computer vision techniques powered by AI, the project aims to identify production defects in real-time, optimise materials and processes, and achieve 100% reliability in the manufactured products.

The outcomes of the project could set new standards for environmentally friendly packaging, helping brand owners reduce their environmental impact amidst ever-increasing environmental regulations - while offering consumers eco-friendly options to help fight against plastic pollution.

From left to right: Dr Hui Luo and Professor Robert Dorey (University of Surrey's School of Engineering); Professor Joseph Keddie (University of Surrey's School of Mathematics and Physics); Scott Winston, CEO at Pulpex; Barrie Harvey, COO at Pulpex; Dr Simon Hadfield (University of Surrey's Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing); Professor Charley Wu (University of Surrey's School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering).