Tracing the history of poor relief in Epsom and Ewell

Residents and researchers in the borough now have enhanced access to a fascinating trove of historic records that shed light on how our local community dealt with poverty, welfare and social care from the early nineteenth century onward.

The system of poor relief in England underwent major changes in the 1800s. Under the "Old Poor Law" (before the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act) each parish vestry was responsible for caring for its poor, sick and destitute residents. After 1834, the "New Poor Law" created groupings of parishes into Poor Law Unions, each with a Board of Guardians and a central workhouse.

In Surrey, the Surrey History Centre holds an extensive guide to Poor Law records, including minute books of the county's Poor Law Unions. For Epsom, the records of the Epsom Poor Law Union from 1836 to 1930 are now indexed and available for consultation.

The minute books of the Epsom Poor Law Union record meetings of the Board of Guardians, who decided whether applicants should receive relief, be admitted to the workhouse, or be "removed" to another parish. They note weekly expenditure, supply orders, the appointment of staff, and the conditions of inmates.

Poor Law records can also include examination papers, bastardy bonds, settlement certificates, removal orders, and workhouse admission and discharge registers. Together they provide a detailed picture of the social realities of life in Victorian and Edwardian Epsom.

Although today a relatively prosperous borough, Epsom's history includes many households living on the edge of poverty. The Union's records allow us to trace how local governance responded to hardship, how relief was funded, and how the population's needs changed across a century.

Behind the official entries lie the human stories: the widowed mother seeking parish relief, the injured labourer, the orphan placed in a workhouse, or the itinerant worker removed from one parish to another. These records reveal the rhythms of ordinary lives and the community's efforts to care for its own.

The Surrey History Centre's page *Poor Law records – minute books* offers guidance and shows that indexes to the Epsom minutes (1836–1930) are now online.

Visit

https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/poor-law-records/minute-books

Researchers should first consult the online indexes and then contact the Surrey History Centre to view the original volumes, which may require a visit or advance booking.

Tips for local researchers

- Search by parish as well as by name many cases are listed under the parish of settlement.
- Note that "removal orders" might show a person being transferred between parishes.
- Combine minute books with census or parish registers for a fuller picture of a family's circumstances.
- Compare relief volumes across decades to identify periods of local economic stress.

With the indexes now online, there is a fresh opportunity for local historians, schools and community groups to explore Epsom's welfare legacy. Projects could include exhibitions of anonymised case studies, research into patterns of employment and hardship, or school activities exploring the social history of our borough.

The minute books of the Epsom Poor Law Union open a compelling window onto over a century of social welfare practice. By engaging with these records, we can better understand the changing nature of poverty, relief and governance in Epsom and Ewell – and recover the lives of those who, often in quiet dignity, sought help when times were hard.

If you make a discovery of local interest from these records, *Epsom and Ewell Times* would be pleased to hear from you.

For many more events and projects from the Surrey History Centre CLICK HERE

Sam Jones - Reporter



Epsom's Famous Turf Set for a Smoother Ride

Racehorses galloping down Epsom's famous turf could soon enjoy a smoother start, after The Jockey Club won backing to re-route a battered path cutting across the six-furlong chute on the Downs.

The current crossing, used daily by racehorses heading back from morning workouts, has become so uneven it is now seen as a safety risk, with one official saying it's "unbelievably close" to where horses enter the starting stalls.

After years of wear and tear, heavy machinery, and wet weather, the path has been left in "horrible" shape and "uneven".

The Jockey Club says the surface has simply had its day, with horses "almost tripping up" as they head for the start line.

Under the plan approved by Epsom and Walton Downs Conservators on November 3, the existing crossing will be shut for good and replaced by a new route looping neatly around the back of the chute.

The redesign will tidy up the area, improve safety for riders and horses, and, importantly for locals, be fully paid for by The Jockey Club. Officials say there will be no cost to taxpayers and no loss of public access, since the old path was never a legal right of way.

"We would re-grass the section of the racetrack that the path would come up from [...] we are looking at a hardcore base topped up by suitable weather surface," said Clerk of the Course Andrew Cooper. He said the new path should be a permanent, long-lasting solution.

Mr Cooper was enthusiastic about the proposal, describing it as a "definite improvement" both for racing and for the look of the Downs. "You wouldn't have a track disturbing the start at Ascot," said Vice Chair Jim Allen. "We're trying to improve Epsom standing in the international horse racing world."

Officials say communication with Downs users will be key to managing the change, but most agreed it is long overdue.

"Of course, safety is really important," said Cllr Kim Spickett. "But people who live here really, really love the Downs. It's beautiful and they really care about it." The councillor for Cuddington said she approved of the designs and said the whole chute would look aesthetic.

"It's not just about safety," one member said. "It'll make the whole area look smarter and more in keeping with what you'd expect at an international racecourse."

The £10,000-£15,000 project could be completed before next year's Derby Festival, depending on The Jockey Club's budget approval. If all goes to plan, by the time the 2026 Derby rolls around, horses will be cantering to the stalls on a smoother, safer, and smarter stretch of turf.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Image: View of uneven starting chute on Epsom Downs and racecourse. (Credit: Epsom and Ewell Borough Council documents)

Bourne again Christmas lights

Bourne Hall is delighted to announce the return of its much-loved Christmas Lights Switch-On event, taking place on Saturday 29 November from 4pm until 7.30pm.

This free, family-friendly celebration invites the local community to gather for an evening filled with festive entertainment, seasonal treats, and holiday cheer.

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Event highlights include:

Live Music & Performances: Enjoy a lively programme of performances from local musicians and dance schools on the main stage. Special guests include Santa Claus and the cast of this year's Epsom Playhouse Pantomime, Aladdin, bringing a sprinkle of theatrical magic to the festivities.

Market & Craft Stalls: Browse a variety of stalls featuring handmade crafts, unique gifts, and festive products – perfect for early Christmas shopping.

Food & Refreshments: Indulge in delicious seasonal fare from The Flying Saucer Café, offering warm treats and tasty bites throughout the evening.

Santa's Grotto Grand Opening: Be among the first to visit the newly opened Santa's Grotto, where children can meet Father Christmas and experience the joy of the season.

Christmas Lights Switch-On Ceremony: Be there for the magical moment at 5.15pm, when The Deputy Mayor of Epsom & Ewell, Santa and beloved festive characters illuminate Bourne Hall with a dazzling display of Christmas lights.

Speaking of the upcoming event, Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village), Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, said: "We're absolutely delighted to welcome back the Christmas Lights Switch-On at Bourne Hall – a cherished tradition that brings our community together in the most magical way. This year's event promises festive fun for all ages, with music, entertainment, and of course, the grand illumination that marks the start of the holiday season in Ewell. I encourage everyone to come along and share in the joy."

This outdoor event is free and open to all, promising a heartwarming celebration for families, friends, and neighbours. Attendees are encouraged to dress warmly and arrive early to enjoy the full programme of festivities.

Visit Bourne Hall from 29 November for a whole host of festivities.

Bourne Hall Christmas Lights Switch On

Saturday 29 November, 4pm - 7.30pm. Free event.

A day of festive fun including:

- Live music and performances
- Market and craft stalls
- Food and refreshments
- Santa's Grotto Grand Opening
- Christmas Lights Switch On 5.15pm The Deputy Mayor of Epsom & Ewell and Santa switch on the Christmas lights at Bourne Hall.

Santa's Grotto - Saturday 29 November to Saturday 20 December

Step into the magic of Christmas at Bourne Hall's enchanting Santa's Grotto!

Please note that Santa's Grotto is free to visit during the week but Saturday visits cost £1 per person

Grand Opening - Friday 29 November

Celebrate the launch of the grotto with a special evening of festive cheer!

Opening times on Saturday 29th November only:

- **1**6:00-17:00
- **1**8:00-19:30
- Entry: £1.00 per person (card payment only, payable at the door) due to the high footfall on this date, there is no pre booking option available, we will operate a first come first serve basis during the two time slots.

Pre-Book Your Visit - Saturdays 6, 13 & 20 December

Reserve your time slot online to guarantee your child's magical moment with Santa.

Spaces are limited, so book early to avoid disappointment!

Tickets are £1.00 per child and can be booked online by following the links below, please select the link for your desired date, this will take you to the booking page where you can select a ticket for your desired time slot:

Saturday 6 December: https://sessami.co/events/meetsantabounrehall?utm medium=website&utm sou...

Saturday 13 December: https://sessami.co/events/6529dc6f-1b2e-4c07-bd35-48c0c157cdde?utm_mediu...

Saturday 20 December: https://sessami.co/events/45c92d02-ab10-48c4-8e69-7836930592d4?utm_mediu...

Weekday Visits - Monday to Friday 10:00-16:00

Enjoy the grotto scenery at your leisure with **free entry** during the week.

Take festive photos, soak in the decorations, and write a letter to Santa to post!

Whether you're booking a weekend visit or popping in during the week, Bourne Hall's grotto is the perfect way to celebrate the season and make lasting memories.

For more information or to get involved, please contact bhevents@epsom-ewell.gov.uk or visit bournehall.org.

Bourne Hall, Spring Street, Ewell, Surrey KT17 1UF. 020 8393 9571. Bourne Hall is open Monday - Saturday, 10am - 5pm.

https://www.bournehall.org

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council



Image: Courtesy Bourne Hall Facebook - Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Music and dance for Ukraine at Epsom Methodist Church

The 13th Ukraine Music Evening took place on Saturday 25th October at Epsom Methodist Church, organised by Lionel Blackman with the support of the Epsom Refugee Network and Surrey Stands With Ukraine. Extra seats were brought in as the Church filled to the brim.

The Worshipful Mayor of Epsom and Ewell, Councillor Robert Leach (RA Nonsuch), opened the event with words of welcome and appreciation for the town's ongoing solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

For the first time, the programme featured a Ukrainian dance ensemble — **Stephania**, choreographed and led by **Alina Luts** — whose performances introduced vibrant movement and colour between the musical sets.

The modern section of the programme offered a change of mood. Epsom-based performers **Helin Konyar** (vocals), a graduate of Epsom's Laine Theatre Arts and **Vladislav Voloshin** (saxophone) presented three songs: *Almost There* (Anika Noni Rose), *Dream a Little Dream* (Robbie Williams) and the Ukrainian favourite *Stari Fotohrafiyi* by Skryabin, combining contemporary and national influences with confident stage presence.

The evening continued with **Vadym Perig**, an alumnus of the nearby Yehudi Menuhin School, who travelled from his new home in Vienna to perform **Robert Schumann's Violin Sonata No. 1**, accompanied by the accomplished Ukrainian pianist **Svitlana Kosenko**. Their expressive partnership recalled the high standard of the first Ukraine Music Evening in 2022, in which both artists also appeared.

Pianist Maria Zhornikova returned to Epsom with a refined interpretation of Enrique Granados' Eight Poetic Valses, followed by À Giverny, a short composition by the organiser Lionel Blackman. Projected images of Monet's gardens accompanied

the performance, and the Mayor's purchase of the sheet music contributed to funds for Surrey Stands With Ukraine.

Further performances by **Stephania** included traditional Ukrainian dances such as *My Kyiv, Polka*, and *Chycheri*, performed by a talented ensemble of soloists.

As is now tradition, the evening concluded with the **Renaissance Choir** under the direction of **Nataliia Zadorizhna** and conductor **Dana Kuhlyk**, singing the Ukrainian National Anthem and a selection of beloved folk songs — *Oh*, in the Cherry Orchard, Why Didn't You Come, Why, Why, My Land, and Hey, Falcons.

All proceeds from the concert went to support the professional musicians who continue to share Ukraine's rich artistic culture with audiences in Epsom.

Nina Kaye

Epsom Methodist Church launches new Story Club and Warm Wednesdays

Epsom Methodist Church (EMC) is organising two exciting ventures for local people and families this autumn.

First out of the blocks is a new Story Club for parents and toddlers that is now meeting every Monday morning at 11am in the community café at the Church in Ashley Road, Epsom. Christa Schoeni, an experienced children's practitioner, is leading 30 minutes of reading, rhyme time and singing for children up to age five. Parents and carers are able to borrow books to read with their children during the week.

"Our aim is to foster a love of reading. With tablets and other electronic devices so commonplace today there is a risk that children miss out on the value of listening, sharing stories with their parents and having their imagination fired by imaginary worlds," said Christa Schoeni.

And EMC's Warm Wednesdays starts a new chapter in its life. For a fourth year the church is open every Wednesday starting on 5th November.

Robert Hill commented: "Every Wednesday we provide a warm space where people can come and chat, join in with quizzes and games, enjoy free teas and coffees and a lunchtime snack of hot soup and a roll. On the first Wednesday of every month we have an expert who comes and provides practical help and advice on reducing energy costs and dealing with gas and electricity bills. Surrey County Council has also provided us with some warm clothing and accessories to help stay warm over the winter months and we will be distributing these supplies to local residents.

"Every Wednesday afternoon from 3.30 our warm space becomes an after-school club with craft activities for children and parents and a chance for older children and adults to hone their table tennis skills. We end our day with everyone enjoying a hot meal together cooked by a great team of volunteers.

"As a town centre church, we see it as our role and mission to serve the local community. We love having hundreds of people coming through our doors each day. We hope that Warm Wednesdays will provide a place not just to be warm and get help with staying warm, but a place where warmth also means friendship and a generous welcome."

Surrey resident's views on County split ignored?

The Government has been accused of ignoring Surrey residents' views on how to dissolve and merge the county's councils after it emerged there was a clear preference for three unitaries rather than the two mega authorities that have been imposed.

A consultation ran from June 17 to August 5 to help the Government understand what residents, businesses, and other stakeholders thought about the changes in Surrey. The results, we were told, would be used to "inform the final decision on which

option is best for Surrey, with a decision expected in October."

On Tuesday, October 28, it was announced that Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts would be abolished and replaced with West Surrey Council and East Surrey Council. The decision flies in the face of the 51 per cent of the 5,617 respondents who backed three unitary proposals versus the 19 per cent that favoured East/West.

This, despite a costly PR drive from Surrey County Council that sent leaflets to every household pushing for the two unitaries. The results were published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as part of its decision – and found that, in addition to the strong resident support for three councils, 56 per cent were also strongly opposed to what has been delivered.

The Ministry said: "Support for the three unitary proposal was based on the view that a three unitary council model resulted in authorities that were a good size and that the groupings of current authority areas made sense. Residents generally believed that the proposal would achieve good economies and efficiencies and be good for local identity, accountability, community engagement and service improvement.

"Negative responses relating to the three unitary proposal highlighted concern that it would not generate significant efficiencies, as well as concerns about how debt would be addressed. Those who supported the two unitary proposal typically did so on the basis of the greater efficiencies presented in the proposal, with the belief that it would create authorities of a good size.

"It added: "There was no single factor as to why residents did not support the two unitary proposal, though the most common theme in responses was that the two unitaries were too large and secondly, that the proposals would be bad for local identity."

Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the Liberal Democrats on Surrey County Council, was one of the drivers behind the three unitary model in his role as leader of Waverley Borough Council. He said: "They cancelled elections, asked for views, and then did the opposite."

The Ministry said its decision process carefully considered responses to the consultation as well as all other relevant information. It said the proposals were assessed against set criteria and that, of the choices, the two-council proposal better met that – particularly as it is seen as more likely to be financially sustainable.

A spokesperson said: "Putting Surrey's local authorities on a more sustainable footing is vital to safeguarding the services its residents rely on, as well as investing in their futures. The government consultation for both proposals, held between July 17 and August 5, treated the proposals equally."

On the cancelled elections, the ministry said they were postponed for a year to provide additional capacity for speeding up reorganisation – given the urgency of creating sustainable unitary local government for Surrey.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

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Image: Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (image Google)

Government Casts Doubt on Surrey's Mayoral

Devolution Promise

No promises have been made that Surrey will get full devolution and a directly elected mayor - despite it being the "entire purpose" of the lengthy and arduous process of splitting the historic county and its 11 boroughs and districts into two mega councils.

It had been understood that Surrey's councils would be abolished and reformed into either two or three unitary authorities, with two sets of elections – first for the new bodies, and then for an overarching mayor in 2027. Surrey County Council's website outlining the devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process mentions the word "Mayor" seven times, and even lists May 2027 as when residents would go to the polls to decide who would be responsible for strategic services such as education, policing, fire and rescue.

However, the Government's own timetable for Surrey only lists a May 2026 election for the two shadow councils, followed by the next round of balloting in May 2031 – and then every four years after that. Furthermore, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has said that the references to Surrey getting a directly elected mayor were "not quite accurate" as the decision "has not been confirmed" and that they were only "committed to working with partners to establish a strategic authority for the area". They clarified that the announcement that Surrey would be dissolved and reformed into East and West Surrey was "not promising a mayor".

Areas with strategic mayors, such as London and Manchester, are given extra devolved powers from Government, with the argument being it gives local people a greater say in the running of their areas. Writing to the leaders of Surrey's councils, the ministry would only say that simplifying local government ensures "a strong foundation for devolution". It said it was committed to working with partners across Surrey, including the new unitary authorities, to establish a strategic authority to ensure relevant functions held at the county level can continue on that geographic footprint where possible, such as transport and adult skills.

It added that the establishment of a strategic authority would be subject to the relevant statutory tests being met and local consent – but makes no mention of a directly elected mayor. This is important because strategic authorities are different from Mayoral Strategic Authorities. According to the ministry, Foundation Strategic Authorities include non-mayoral combined authorities and combined county authorities, and any local authority designated as a strategic authority without a mayor.

Mayoral Strategic Authorities, such as the Greater London Authority, all Mayoral Combined Authorities and all Mayoral Combined County Authorities, "automatically begin as Mayoral Strategic Authorities" – and only those that meet specified eligibility criteria may be designated as Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities to unlock further devolution.

It has left the county council saying devolution is now an "ambition" rather than a formality. Others have called out the council for rushing into such a seismic shift, and cancelling elections to get devolution done – without any guarantees over whether the county would get a mayor.

Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the Liberal Democrat group at Surrey County Council, said having a mayor "was the entire purpose of the reorganisation". He added: "The county council has gone in on this nonsense without any guarantee over the reason they have it, despite that being the principal reason the county has initiated this process – but they have yet to receive any guarantees. I'm sure the county will reflect their reasons for going for this in the light that the ministry said we may not be getting devolution."

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Image: Tim Oliver (credit Surrey Live) and County graphic (credit SCC).

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Surrey prison drug smuggling drones might be investigated

Drones smuggling drugs into prison will be investigated in an inquest into a man who died in custody. The full inquest, which opens next month, will also look at his care and supervision.

Oliver Mulangala, 40, was found dead at HMP High Down, Sutton in July 2024. A pre-inquest review was held at Woking's Coroner's Court on October 29, ahead of a 10-week inquest due to begin on November 17.

At the hearing, Coroner Jonathan Stevens said it was his role to investigate any potential factors contributing to Mr Mulangala's death, including the possibility that drugs may have entered the prison by drones. However, Ministry of Justice (MoJ) representative Mr Simms said there was no evidence to suggest the substances consumed by Mr Mulangala were delivered by drone.

He warned releasing details of intelligence related to drone activity in prison, and measures to reduce or minimise drones, could risk compromising the prison's security. Mr Simms said the MoJ's decision had "not been taken lightly" but said "it was not in the public interest" to provide this information.

Barrister Michael Etienne, acting on behalf of Mr Mulangala's family at the coroner's court in Woking, said the family wanted the inquest to look at the monitoring, care and supervision in the 12 months prior to Oliver's tragic death. The court heard that the prison officer who failed to conduct the roll call the morning of July 13 was subsequently dismissed. When Mr Mulangala was found by officers, they undertook initial life support.

Coroner Stevens asked to see all the evidence available from family statements, the MoJ and NHS trust, before deciding if it is relevant for the full inquest. A full inquest with a jury is due to take place for two weeks from November 17. Numerous witnesses will be called, including senior figures from HMP High Down, current prisoners and those responsible for Mr Mulangala's health.

The Ministry of Justice and North West London NHS Trust have been identified as interested persons in the inquest.

Emily Dalton LDRS

HMP High Down from Google maps

Surrey Uni show AI systems based on the human brain's save energy

Artificial intelligence (AI) could soon become more energy-efficient and faster, thanks to a new approach developed at the University of Surrey that takes direct inspiration from biological neural networks of the human brain.

In a study published in Neurocomputing, researchers from Surrey's Nature-Inspired Computation and Engineering (NICE) group have shown that mimicking the brain's sparse and structured neural wiring can significantly improve the performance of artificial neural networks (ANNs) – used in generative AI and other modern AI models such as ChatGPT – without sacrificing accuracy.

The method, called Topographical Sparse Mapping (TSM), rethinks how AI systems are wired at their most fundamental level. Unlike conventional deep-learning models – such as those used for image recognition and language processing – which connect every neuron in one layer to all neurons in the next, wasting energy, TSM connects each neuron only to nearby or related ones, much like how the brain's visual system organises information efficiently. Through this natural design, the model eliminates the need for vast numbers of unnecessary connections and computations.

An enhanced version, called Enhanced Topographical Sparse Mapping (ETSM), goes a step further by introducing a biologically inspired "pruning" process during training – similar to how the brain gradually refines its neural connections as it learns. Together, these approaches allow AI systems to achieve equal or even greater accuracy while using only a fraction of the parameters and energy required by conventional models.

Dr Roman Bauer, Senior Lecturer at the University of Surrey's School of Computer Science and Electronic Engineering, and

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project supervisor, said:

"Training many of today's popular large AI models can consume over a million kilowatt-hours of electricity, which is equivalent to the annual use of more than a hundred US homes, and cost tens of millions of dollars. That simply isn't sustainable at the rate AI continues to grow. Our work shows that intelligent systems can be built far more efficiently, cutting energy demands without sacrificing performance."

Surrey's enhanced model achieved up to 99% sparsity – meaning it could remove almost all of the usual neural connections – but still matched or exceeded the accuracy of standard networks on benchmark datasets. Because it avoids the constant fine-tuning and rewiring used by other approaches, it trains faster, uses less memory and consumes less than one per cent of the energy of a conventional AI system.

Mohsen Kamelian Rad, a PhD student at the University of Surrey and lead author of the study, said:

"The brain achieves remarkable efficiency through its structure, with each neuron forming connections that are spatially well-organised. When we mirror this topographical design, we can train AI systems that learn faster, use less energy and perform just as accurately. It's a new way of thinking about neural networks, built on the same biological principles that make natural intelligence so effective"

While the current framework applies the brain-inspired mapping to an AI model's input layer, extending it to deeper layers could make networks even leaner and more efficient. The research team is also exploring how the approach could be used in other applications, such as more realistic neuromorphic computers, where the efficiency gains could have an even greater impact.

Surrey University



Epsom and Ewell Times asked ChatGPT to explain the above press release from Surrey University and this is what it wrote:

"Artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT rely on vast numbers of digital connections between "neurons", mimicking how the human brain works – but they use enormous amounts of electricity to do it. Researchers at the University of Surrey have developed a new way to wire these networks that could make them dramatically more efficient.

Instead of connecting every artificial neuron to every other, the Surrey team copied the brain's habit of linking only nearby or related neurons. Their method, called **Topographical Sparse Mapping**, cuts out unnecessary connections, saving energy while maintaining accuracy. A refined version, **Enhanced Topographical Sparse Mapping**, even "prunes" the network during learning – like the brain trimming unused connections as it develops. The result is AI that can train faster, use less memory and consume less than one per cent of the energy of current systems.

If this approach proves scalable, it could mean greener, cheaper and quicker AI – taking inspiration not from bigger computers, but from the extraordinary efficiency of the human brain."

Residents sigh of relief if Government bail out bankrupt Woking

The government's whopping £500m bailout for debt-ridden Woking Borough Council may not be the last. The cash injection, announced as part of Surrey's local government reorganisation on October 28, will cover roughly a quarter of Woking's debt. But ministers have described it as only the "first tranche" of support. Surrey County Council leader Tim Oliver said commissioners appointed to oversee Woking's finances are still selling off property assets to reduce the total debt and the government has left

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the door open to further payments.

"They've called it a first tranche. So this is £500 million now to get on with selling down the assets, reducing the debt as much as you can, and then we'll have a conversation about that balance," he told the Local Democracy Reporting Service. "The expectation is that whatever the rump of the debt remains, the government will pick it up."

Woking's debts, which peaked around £2bn, stem from a series of risky property investments that left the council effectively bankrupt. The government's intervention prevents the shortfall from being passed on to other Surrey residents, something Cllr Oliver said ministers have been "very clear" would not happen. "It's nobody's fault, least of all residents', but they were at risk of being penalised just for living in the wrong place," the council leader said. "We worked hard to make sure that didn't happen."

He added that securing government support for Woking's debt was a collective effort between Surrey's council leaders and MPs. Cllr Oliver added that ministers were keen to stress Woking's situation was "exceptional" to prevent other indebted councils seeking similar bailouts. Although Woking council may be able to breathe a slight sigh of relief with the government's handout, residents are still left wondering what will happen with the rest of the debt across Surrey.

Cllr Oliver said the coming months would be focused on "getting the detail right" and ensuring that the reorganisation delivers simpler, stronger local government. "It's great to get a decision, but now the hard work starts," he said. "We'll make sure this works for residents and that the government honours its commitment to clearing Woking's debt."

The announcement came alongside confirmation that Surrey will be split into two new unitary councils, replacing the current county and district system by 2027. While more than half of those who responded to the public consultation backed a three-way split, ministers said the two-unitary model was "more likely to be financially sustainable". Local government minister Alison McGovern said the decision "does not set any precedent" for other areas, but acknowledged Surrey's "unique financial context": a hint that more support could still be needed. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government have been asked for comment.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Related reports:

Strip Woking's debt-man of his OBE MP says

Government bailout to ease Woking's debt burden

Who will be saddled with Spelthorne's and Woking's £3 billion debts?

Image: Woking Victoria Square Towers (View From North)