Epsom Playhouse £1.50 per ticket fee from 1st April

The Epsom Playhouse will now charge an additional £1.50 facility fee per ticket as of the 1st April 2025.

During its meeting on the 16th January 2025, the Community and Well-being Committee, chaired by Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village), discussed proposals for the Epsom Playhouse for 2025/26, aspart of their fees and charges agenda.

The proposal outlined the growing struggles the aging Playhouse currently faces, with the infrastructure remaining the same for 40 years.

A major concern highlighted by the report was the technical show lighting, with end-of-life issues potentially hindering future productions. For the Playhouse to provide 'high-quality, diverse, and well-balanced entertainment to support the local community and enhance our reputation as a cultural destination', it was deemed essential for the Playhouse to undergo maintenance work.

The main focus of the Epsom Playhouse proposal was to source a way to finance this necessary maintenance. The report states that 'to support the ongoing operational costs of running the venue, which have significantly increased, we propose the introduction of a facility fee of £1.50 to each ticket sold from 1 April 2025, the income raised annually will be ring fenced for the Playhouse upkeep.'

The Council's senior accountant explained that this new facility fee could see around £80,000 in additional revenue, directly going towards the upkeep of the Playhouse annually. He assured Councillor **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) that the additional fee would be clearly indicated for those purchasing a ticket.

Councillor **Rachel King** (RA Town) highlighted that an additional £1.50 could tip the balance of tickets being affordable for some households wishing to attend the theatre. Other local theatres have adopted this scheme that in some instances is between the £2-£5 range.

Councillor Clive Woodbridge added that there will be regular monitoring of ticket sales to determine whether the new fee damages the Playhouse's box office sales.

The committee was in agreement to go ahead with the recommended proposal of a new facility fee, which will be implemented as of the 1st April 2025. Any bookings made before this date will not incur the additional £1.50 fee.

Epsom and Ewell's 11 to 9 win 1 to 0

Epsom and Ewell 1-0 Spelthorne Sports. Combined Counties League - Premier Division South. Tuesday 21st January 2025.

It was hard not to feel sorry for the visiting Spelthorne Sports team on Tuesday evening at the KGF. Well aware of their precarious league position, they battled throughout the match and held their own for much of the contest, only to have to replace their keeper due to injury and end up with just nine men after a pair of dismissals, yet it took a 96th minute goal from Craig Dundas to finally end their resistance as we defeated them by a goal to nil in an attritional encounter at the KGF.

It was interesting to see Kevin Kardel back in goal for the Salts, seeing as he had only tweeted his goodbyes to our club four days previously, but an injury to Dan O'Donovan required him to return and he had a fairly quiet evening, which leaves his stats for the club currently standing at an impressive 66.7% of clean sheets! We made three other changes from the VCD match and welcomed back Anthony Nazareth and Luke Miller to the starting eleven along with Nathan Best, who had been unavailable for the last two matches because he was cup-tied. Nazareth was involved in the first nervous moment of the match for supporters who collectively held their breath for a minute when he appeared to bring a Spelthorne striker down in the area, but the referee was happy that no foul had been committed and play went on.

The remainder of the first half was played out mainly in midfield. Conrad Essilfie-Conduah struck from distance, but it was an easy save for Henrey Podle in the Spelthorne goal. At the other end Adam Green picked up a yellow card for upending a visiting player near the edge of the penalty area, but the free kick was sent over Kardel's crossbar.

The only real chance of any kind in the first half came almost by surprise as Best tried his luck from long range. His attempt to lob the keeper didn't appear to be working as the ball actually landed in front of him, but it bounced up and the keeper missed it completely with the ball just grazing the face of the crossbar on its way out for a goal kick. It would have been an embarrassing way to concede, but the teams went in goalless at the break. Here's a quick stat for those of you who like such things; we have not

scored a League goal in the first thirteen minutes of any match all season!

The second half opened up with a scare as the visitors fashioned a good chance just two minutes into the second period, but screwed the shot across the face of goal when they really should have hit the target. It looked like that would cost them in the 53rd minute when the match took a turn in our favour after one of our players was tugged in the area as we tried to reach a right wing Miller delivery. No one really appealed, yet the referee awarded a penalty and then gave their defender Shaun Preddie a second yellow card, to go with the card he had picked up early in the match. Kendall stepped up but scuffed the spot kick straight at Podle who made the save. We have just one goal from a penalty all season, which came back in August at Phoenix Sports.

The drama wasn't over though as Podle appeared to injure himself in making the save and required treatment. Although he continued, he went down again a few minutes later after keeping out a Green volley and was replaced on the hour. Despite the addition of Dundas from the bench and a strike from Kendall that was deflected just wide, it didn't stop the visitors from making a good fist of things and a mêlée in our penalty area concluded with a shot just wide of Kardel's left hand post. All of a sudden we had some defending to do and Nicolas Bostan headed a dangerous ball away with Kardel having to punch the next delivery clear. Then a free header bounced kindly in front of Kardel from fairly close range.

This was becoming a little embarrassing. To find ourselves pushed back by the team rooted to the foot of the table despite holding a man advantage was concerning. We were holding more of the ball, but passes kept going astray and although the surface was not great, we created little, although a high ball in from Green was headed just beyond the far post out of a crowd of players.

In the 88th minute our left back Kionte-Gillfillian-Waul was brought down by Daniel Watts and although the referee allowed our advantage, he soon had to stop play as it became apparent that the two players were clearly not happy with each other, to put it mildly. Then we saw something I don't believe I've ever seen before as our man picked up a yellow for the "afters" only to then see the referee say quite clearly to Watts that he was getting one booking for the foul and one for the afters. A double yellow card! The visitors couldn't quite believe it and we would be up against nine men for the remaining period of time, which turned out to be nearly eight minutes of added time.

And in the sixth minute of that time we finally broke through. A high ball in from the right hand side that may have been delivered by Bostan was knocked forward by Kendall where Dundas reached the ball ahead of the replacement keeper. People who were a little closer than I advised that our man may have controlled the ball with his hand as it bounced up, but then with his next touch he fired it into the roof of the net from a couple of yards for the winner.

The visitors certainly appeared on the receiving end of most of the rough decisions in this match, but I suppose that's what happens when you are at the foot of the table. I don't believe that either team really did enough to say they deserved the win, even though we held the balance of possession, particularly after the first dismissal, and it could be argued that if Spelthorne play with that sort of spirit for the rest of the season then they may stay up, but they also failed to take the chances that they had and sit well adrift now. I cannot see a way back for them this season.

From a playing perspective, the commitment was definitely there and I'm sure people will point to the playing surface, but we wouldn't have found a way past most of the teams in our League on this performance. The good news is that we moved up a couple of places to sixteenth as a result of this win and are just two points away from Sheerwater in twelfth with five games in hand! More relevantly we are now 17 points clear of Spelthorne Sports and 12 clear of Balham with two games in hand. It's going to take a massive turnaround for either of those clubs to catch the lower midtable pack, which I'm sure will be a relief to a number of those clubs, including ourselves!

Epsom & Ewell: Kevin Kardel, Niall Stillwell, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Nicolas Bostan, Anthony Nazareth, Luke Miller, Conrad Essilfie-Conduah, Will Kendall, Nathan Best, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Craig Dundas for Essilfie-Conduah (62), Tobi Falodi for Nelson-Roberts (81)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

Parents lose trust in Surrey state "school family" admission priority

A Surrey suburb is up in arms as an 'oustanding' secondary school could change its admissions, making it more tricky for local children to get a place.

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Consultation for the new admissions for September 2025 at Hinchley Wood School, in Esher, ends on Wednesday 22 January. If approved, the academy school would prioritise students who attend the schools within its own trust- Hinchley Wood Primary School and Thames Ditton Junior School-leaving Long Ditton St Mary's Junior School and Claygate Primary School lower down the pecking order.

But parents of Long Ditton St Mary's Junior are furious their child could lose a place at the only local state school in the area. Children who attend Long Ditton St Mary's Junior School have traditionally gone to Hinchley Wood Secondary School, but the admission changes could see local students deprioritised from their closest high school and forced to go elsewhere.

The 'outstanding' Ofsted-rated school frequently comes as one of the top places in Surrey. Ben Bartlett, CEO of Hinchley Wood Learning Partnership Trust, said he had "massive sympathy" for those worried about the proposed changes and understood parents always want their child to get into the "best" school.

An academy trust, Hinchley Wood School is legally and financially one organisation so it shares resources—such as safeguarding, SEND provision, disadvantaged learners and educational subjects like French, Music and P.E with trust schools. Mr Bartlett argued giving the two primary schools priority keeps children and their parents "in the Hinchley Wood [trust] family".

Mr Bartlett and Co-Headteacher Ms Maria Cachia explained keeping students in the trust means any safeguarding information or education can be easily transferred as schools have "shared values and strategic aims".

Now, parents say they are having to decide whether to send their children to the Ofsted-rated 'good' Thames Ditton primary school to have a better chance of going to Hinchley Wood, or to send them to the 'outstanding' Long Ditton St Mary's Junior. One dad said it was like "you've got a gun to your head from the local state school".

Shaya's son goes to Thames Ditton Infant School. He said his family has been "torturing ourselves for eight months" to decide which junior school to send him to in the hopes of getting a good secondary school place which could have a "profound impact" on his longterm future. Shaya said: "We're being forced to choose whether to prioritise our son's immediate educational means at the sacrifice of his long-term education."

Shaya, who lives less than 1km away from the secondary school, said: "The withdrawal of the catchment area clearly demonstrates the Trust wants to prioritise children who do not live locally over local children, and its own financial health." But the senior leadership at Hinchley Wood argued it would not be fair for children attending a primary school within the Trust to not proceed to the secondary school just because they live out of the catchment area.

Antony Warren, parent of two children at Long Ditton St Mary's Infant School, said it is "wholly unfair" for the academy to change its admissions suddenly. He said: "We moved, we invested significant life savings into our house and in the community as a whole [so] we knew we were in the catchment area."

If children do not get accepted into Hinchley Wood Secondary, the next nearest school could be in Kingston where the council has no obligation to accept Surrey pupils. While the Long Ditton students could walk down the road to the secondary school, they may have to get the bus for 30-45 minutes to Esher High or a Kingston school. "I pay my taxes," said Antony, "I feel my children deserve the right to go to their local state school."

For many of the young children their first years of education were riddled with Covid and lockdowns, leading to disrupted education and interrupted friendships. Some children now struggle with anxiety and stress, which many parents fear will be exacerbated if the kids start new secondary schools out of the local area where they will not know anyone.

A tight and close-knit community, parents said the Dittons and Hinchley Wood are entangled together with sports teams and extracurricular groups. Preventing children from going to the local secondary school fractures these ties and uproots them from their social connections.

"It's just not right that a multi-academy trust can just wield its power and prioritise their own schools for their own benefits for their own financial gains [and] totally disregarding the needs of the local community," said Annette Whymark, who has a son in Year 4. Annette and her husband James Whymark started the action group to spread the word in the Thames Ditton community.

The campaign group, made up of around 65 parents, feared changing the admissions could disperse children into Surrey and Kingston, causing a ripple effect on school admissions. Parents understood those at Hinchley Wood and Thames Ditton primary schools will be in favour of the admissions change because "they want to do what is best for their children". However, they emphasised it as "grossly unfair".

Some argued that the Hinchley Wood's consultation is "financially driven" because it prioritises the primary schools within their trust by encouraging parents to send their children to that school. By increasing the pupil number, the school will get more funding from the government.

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Mr Bartlett disagreed the consultation was motivated by financial gain, and stressed the student admission number for the two primary schools was actually being lowered in line with a falling birth rate.

Based on school admission data from Surrey County Council, Mr Bartlett and Mrs Hogan told the LDRS there would be a "minimal" impact in the number of students from Long Ditton entering the school. The CEO said the area was "blessed with a spread of fantastic schools" from Esher to Kingston, where children can frequently get local buses to school.

"This is a genuine consultation and no decision has been made yet," said Mr Bartlett. After the consultation finishes, the responses will be read and considered by the governors and trustees for the school.

Monica Harding MP for Esher and Walton, said she was concerned about the impact of the proposed admission changes and has shared these with Ben Bartlett. She said: "I have urged HWS to explore alternatives that better serve local families. I will continue to speak with the leadership at HWS on this issue.

"I have also raised these issues in both meetings and written correspondence with the DfE and Surrey CC. The DfE assured me that they are taking these concerns seriously and will "monitor and work with the trust and Surrey County Council to ensure no schools are made vulnerable by such changes if they occur."

"I am very aware of the anxiety these proposals are causing parents, and I remain committed to advocating for solutions that keep the best interests of our children at the forefront and ensure all of our local schools are thriving. I encourage all parents to participate in the consultation process to help ensure the final decision reflects the needs of our community."

"I also recognise that local schools are facing huge financial strain and that they are all challenged to deliver high-quality education without commensurate funding. I will continue to push the Government hard to provide the resources necessary for our children to have the best possible education."

Campaigners outside Long Ditton Infant school. (Credit: Emma Pericas Sims)

Sutton & Epsom RFC just fail to mount comeback

SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 42 OLD TIFFINIANS 46. Saturday 18th January. Sutton and Epsom started this campaign with a rollicking runaway win over Old Colfeians.

Since then the Rugby Lane crowd has enjoyed an overwhelming diet of tense, low scoring affairs with defensive defiance the common theme. The avalanche of points in the 48-43 loss to Old Reigatian being very much the statistical outlier. However, a glance at the reverse fixture, a 41-19 Tiffinians triumph, and the bonus point penchant of OTs perhaps gave a hint to another Old Boy try-fest. In a seesaw encounter of thirteen tries the visitors edged it 46-42.

Sutton and Epsom kicked off with prop **Alex Mount** celebrating his 100th league appearance and desperate to eviscerate the memory of that chastening October loss. The opening salvoes were fast and furious with both sides hinting that it would be an entertaining afternoon on a favourable surface with minimal elemental interference. After ten minutes an accidental offside from a lineout offered Freddy Bunting the chance to peg the Old Boys back into their 22. This initiated an all-out assault as the forwards looked to open the scoring against a resilient Tiffinian defence. Ironically on this red-letter day for the centurion it was the ultimate unsung hero, Josh Glanville, who took the best supporting Oscar with the opening try on his 50th appearance. The stalwart second row is worth many a verse of praise as he is always at the heart of the action doing the less glamorous hard work that is much admired by not only his teammates but also the supporters. Bunting added the extras for a reassuring 7-0 lead.

Five minutes later the hosts had doubled their advantage. Benefiting from two quick-fire penalties the Black & Whites were gifted a 5-metre lineout in the corner. With commendable precision and control the forwards ushered Rob Hegarty over the line. If Sutton and Epsom had started with the single-minded determination to redress the balance from the unpalatable defeat at Summer Avenue then their opponents demonstrated admirable sangfroid. As Bunting prepared to make it 14 zip there were no splenetic recriminations under the posts but just a calm assessment from Captain Hobbs that they were playing well. Little did we know that we had the heir to Nostradamus in our midst.

There followed a remarkable twenty minutes. To describe it as a reversal of fortunes would be a grotesque understatement. It was a tectonic shift of cataclysmic proportions that altered the landscape of Rugby Lane with 29 unanswered points from a rampant Old Tiffinians. It started with some familiar ineffective kick tennis followed by a couple of penalties conceded by the hosts. The visitors pressed hard and the livewire scrum half Matt Fowler collected the first of his trio of tries. The touchline conversion failed and 5-14. Sutton and Epsom seemed to shrug off this aberration with a promising attack from a tapped penalty but good work



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was undermined by poor handling. Tiffs next incursion in the home 22 saw winger Segun splendidly exploit a Sutton and Epsom error with a stylish finish. The touchline conversion struck the crossbar and went over for 12-14. The comfortable cushion had deflated to a miserly 2-point advantage.

An emboldened opposition were certainly not finished. More penalties ceded territory, more errors were punished and two more tries followed in the next five minutes. Matt Fowler was the major beneficiary as his excellent support play and eye for the tryline saw him complete a first period hat trick. Coach Blackburn must have been delighted at the response of his charges with the high tempo play, slick passing and a lethal awareness that led to four clinical finishes and a 26-14 lead. With the interval approaching Sutton and Epsom conceded another penalty in front of their posts but with the 4-try bonus point already securely banked Sharif Dougramaji took the three points meaning that Sutton and Epsom required three scores as now they trailed 29-14.

In time added on in the first half the home crowd urged their team to respond. Captain Bunting perhaps motivated by an understandable despair at the horrific turn of events adopted the motto of the suffragettes: "Deeds not Words". He set off on a stunning break combining pace, power and changes of direction before being halted in the OT 22 and gaining a penalty. With the lineout operating like a metronome the kick was declined in favour of the 5-metre lineout. With the throw safely secured Sutton and Epsom advanced to the line. Desperate defence could not stop the drive and Mr Maynard spotted skulduggery and trotted under the posts to award a penalty try. The whistle blew to conclude a breathless 50-point first half with Tiffinians 29-21 to the good.

Sutton and Epsom opened the second period on the front foot and despite missing an early opportunity to cross the whitewash they were given a second chance with a prior indiscretion. The supporters waited in anxious anticipation for the 5-metre lineout. Once again the forwards delivered and Rob Hegarty had his second score and Sutton and Epsom had the bonus point. The reliability of the lineout was rivalling the Bunting boot that made it 28-29. The penalty count mounted against the visitors. Five minutes later Sutton and Epsom faced the familiar question: Take the simple three points or go for the maximum? Their positive approach and the excellence of the lineout gave Rob Hegarty his hat trick. Freddy Bunting impressed once more with a touchline conversion and the Black & Whites had regained the lead 35-29 but there was still 30 minutes on the clock.

The restart should be a moment to refocus and heighten one's concentration. Sadly Sutton and Epsom reacted in statuesque fashion to the kick. To compound this error they conceded a completely unnecessary penalty for a high tackle on a man in the maul. For the umpteenth time the ball arrowed into the corner from a penalty. This time there was some variation on the theme as the ball was shipped wide to the backs. The Sutton and Epsom focus on the catch and drive left an overlap and Sharif Dougramaji bulldozed his way over the line. The centre converted his try and the pendulum swung back in Old Tiffinians favour as they led 36-35.

Ineffectual kicking and penalties now haunted Sutton and Epsom as the Old Boys were in the ascendancy. They declined a simple penalty in front of the posts in search of another try. There was a return to the popular catch and drive theme as Number 8 Jaewon Jang completed the score. The missed conversion left Sutton and Epsom trailing by 35-41 knowing a goal would inch them ahead. Moments later and it was roles reversed. Sutton and Epsom had the penalty and another lineout opportunity. Once more the excellent throwing in by Alex Mount found its mark. The home pack bullied their way to the line and prop Callum Gibson scored from a couple of centimetres out. The highly lubricated crowd roared their approval as the Bunting conversion sailed over and his side led 42-41 with ten to go.

It was the traditional tense ending for the assembled crowd as has become the norm at Rugby Lane but that certainly did not ease the tension. Errors and infringements far outnumbered moments of quality as all involved knew that the next score might be the decider. As the hosts ran the ball from just outside their 22 disaster struck as a pass was intercepted. Sharif Dougramaji kept his composure and scored lucky try number 13 in the match. However, once again he failed with the conversion and with the OTs leading 46-42 Sutton and Epsom required a try to lead. In the in-goal area a disconsolate and exhausted Alex Mount left the field having given his all. He may not have scored a try but his excellent lineout service had provided a remarkable six tries for his pack.

There was to be no last gasp glory and Old Tiffinians held on to complete the double over Sutton and Epsom. The hosts' errors had been costly but great credit to the visitors who pounced on every opportunity and did not squander a chance all game. Hat trick hero Matt Fowler exemplified their ruthless streak and the first half purple patch was the foundation of their success. Rob Hegarty joins the illustrious trio of Will East (Luton), Kyren Ghumra (Shelford) and Ollie Baptiste-Wilson (Royal Wootton Bassett) who have scored a hat trick in the league for Sutton and Epsom in a losing cause. The match was a curious affair because there was much to applaud in the Sutton and Epsom performance but their demise was the result of self-inflicted wounds that were deep and proved to be fatal. Next Saturday sees the visit to Sidcup to play the fixture that was recently frozen off. There can be no doubt about not only the severity of the task but also that the hosts will be equally unforgiving if the Black & Whites repeat such an error-strewn performance.



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Sutton and Epsom:

O'Brien, Scott, Bibby, Bunting ©, Rea, Lennard, Munford, Mount, Boaden, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty. Replacements: Hilton, Davies & Wise.

Old Tiffinians:

Day, Segun, Dougramaji, Sabania, Marshall, Taylor, Fowler, Hobbs ©, Blackman, Turner, O'Connell, Noeh, Dore, Graham & Jang. Replacements: Oram, Turnbull & Burgess.

New homes planned for Ashtead

Hundreds of new homes could be built in Ashtead if newly submitted plans to Mole Valley District Council are approved. Wates Developments and its partners, Vistry Group, have submitted outline plans for up to 270 homes, of which about 40 per cent will be affordable.

The proposals, which still need to go through the planning process, also include a community centre that could become a children's nursery. Nearby schools are said to be under-subscribed, with vacancy rates expected to grow in some areas, according to planning documents submitted to the council. The documents suggest that the new homes could help boost pupil numbers in local schools.

John Tarvit, director of planning for Wates Developments, said: "We have an exciting vision for this site to create a sense of place and community, with landscape-led design that incorporates a variety of green spaces. Our proposals will help encourage social interaction, provide safe and attractive streets, encourage sustainable travel choices, and maximise biodiversity. We're proud that this will be a high-quality, net-zero development that reduces carbon emissions and enhances the resilience of the development to a changing climate. All new homes will be lean, clean, and green."

The land, south of Ermyn Way, has been allocated for residential-led development by the council. The developers state they are "committed to creating a distinctive and responsive new neighbourhood, offering a good range of house sizes and types.

"The proposed development will enhance the existing local community and deliver a range of benefits for people in Ashtead in addition to the much-needed new homes."

In addition to the housing scheme, the developers are proposing a community building with the potential for a children's nursery, 30 acres of open space, and a children's play area. At this stage, the plans are in outline format, but the developers have said that buildings will vary across the site, reaching up to a maximum of three storeys, although the majority will be two storeys.

The developers believe this approach will "create a varied roofscape, define marker buildings and add to the visual richness" of the project. They have also indicated that details such as the sizes of the homes, in terms of bedrooms, and the layout of the development are yet to be finalised.

Wates said the site currently consists of arable agricultural fields just north of the M25 and within walking and cycling distance of both Ashtead and Leatherhead. It is also already well connected to bus services. As part of the pre-planning process, Wates held meetings with nearby schools, including Trinity Primary School.

The planning statement noted: "At the meeting, the applicants were informed that the school is well below pupil capacity and referred to the same position at other local schools. It was explained to the applicants that local schools are accepting pupils who might not otherwise meet their selection criteria." It added: "It was confirmed that Greville School currently has capacity and in the coming years will likely have greater capacity as there are significant spaces available in the reception year."

Homes would be built on the western side of the site to create "a clear distinction between residential development and the eastern section within the retained green belt." The final layout will be determined through discussion with the council.

Wates Development's outline plans for up to 270 homes near the M25 in Ashstead (image Wates Development)

Surrey Uni to lead on speech to sign GBT computer programme

A large-language model (LLM) built to meet the needs of the Deaf community, translating between signed and spoken language, is the aim of a new project led by the University of Surrey.

SignGPT: Building Generative Predictive Transformers for Sign Language has been awarded £8.45m from the UK Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council. The five-year project will build tools to allow spoken language to be automatically translated into photo-realistic sign language and video of sign language to be translated into spoken language – a complex translation problem that is yet to be solved.

Surrey will work alongside the University of Oxford, the Deafness Cognition and the Language Research Centre at University College London, key Deaf stakeholders, and the Deaf community.

Professor Richard Bowden, Principal Investigator of the project from the University of Surrey's Institute for People-Centred AI, said:

"Large language models such as those behind ChatGPT and Gemini are transforming many aspects of our personal and working lives – and that transformation is happening at a blistering pace. Our project, SignGPT, is not about replacing humans, but it is about ensuring the Deaf community is not left behind in this revolution.

"By creating technology that serves the community, we're enabling equal access to information, working towards seamless communication between the Deaf and hearing world, and demonstrating that AI can be a tool for inclusivity and empowerment. SignGPT isn't just about accessibility for Deaf people – it's about setting a standard for how innovation can address inequities, strengthen human connection, and build a more inclusive society. In a world shaped by rapid technological change, projects like this show that AI's potential is greatest when it uplifts everyone."

Globally, there are around 70 million Deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals, many of whom use sign language as their primary form of communication. For many, written/spoken languages serve as a second or third language, and proficiency in these languages can vary. There is no universal sign language: sign languages are natural human languages created over centuries by Deaf communities and are not derived from spoken languages. Their underlying rules and structures remain a rich area of linguistic study. Each sign language has its own unique grammar and lexicon, relying on both manual gestures (hands) and non-manual expressions (body and face), along with spatial elements, to convey meaning.

Professor Bencie Woll, sign linguist, co-investigator of the project, and founder of the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre at UCL, said:

"This project is a unique collaboration between vision scientists and sign linguists with Deaf and hearing researchers working together towards our common goals."

Mark Wheatley, CEO of the Royal Association for Deaf People (RAD), said:

"I am pleased that this important grant will empower the Deaf community to have further equal access by harnessing AI and large language models. We will ensure that the University of Surrey, Oxford University, and the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre at UCL, alongside Deaf-led stakeholders such as RAD, take a people-centred approach to ensuring ethical responsibility and the accuracy of translations so that we, the Deaf community, can use them for everyday purposes."

Professor Kearsy Cormier, one of the Co-Investigators on the project from University College London, said:

"So much work in sign language technology is undertaken by researchers with no understanding of how sign languages work, nor any lived experience of deafness themselves. This project will allow real co-creation/co-development of this technology with Deaf and hearing researchers in linguistics and deaf studies working alongside computer vision specialists – with each group learning from each other – and, importantly, building capacity amongst Deaf researchers so they may lead this field in the future."

SignGPT's research team will produce the largest sign language dataset in the world and use it to build a sign language LLM that can provide the breadth of application to the Deaf community that current LLMs provide for written/spoken languages. In doing so, the project will also generate tools for data annotation that will be released for use by the wider community. The project already has Deaf members within both the research team and wider partners, but it is hoping to recruit more staff for whom British Sign Language is their primary language.

The challenge of automatically translating between sign languages and spoken languages is highly complex and remains

unsolved. SignGPT will produce open-source toolkits for linguistic use, web-based demonstrations for accessible knowledge exchange and run outreach programmes alongside collaborative workshops.

Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust Calls Out Delays to New Hospital Programme

The long-awaited specialist emergency care hospital for southwest London and Surrey has faced yet another setback following the Government's announcement about delays to the national New Hospital Programme. Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust has voiced strong concerns over the consequences of these delays, which they warn could have dire implications for patient care and infrastructure safety.

Health Secretary **Wes Streeting** outlined the revised timeline, stating that the New Hospital Programme, initially set for completion by 2030, will now proceed in four phases. Notably, nine schemes under the programme will not commence construction until between 2035 and 2039. Streeting emphasized the need for a "firm footing with sustainable funding" to ensure all projects are delivered.

A Legacy of Promises and Delays

The proposed hospital in Sutton, intended to centralize critical emergency services for Epsom, St Helier, and the surrounding areas, was approved in 2020 as part of the Government's pledge to deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030. Initially, the Sutton facility was set to open by 2025. However, delays have since pushed this date to 2027 "at the earliest," with recent announcements suggesting construction may not begin until much later in the decade.

This latest postponement has sparked frustration within the Trust. **Dr James Marsh**, Group Deputy Chief Executive of the St George's, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group, did not hold back in his criticism:

"After decades of false promises, the people of southwest London and Surrey have been let down once again. Every year we delay adds up to £150m to the cost of a new hospital and keeping the current buildings safe to provide care."

Critical State of Current Facilities

The Trust has long highlighted the challenges posed by the aging infrastructure at Epsom and St Helier hospitals. Dr Marsh provided a stark assessment of the situation:

"We have already had to condemn and demolish one of our wards. It's only a matter of time before other parts of our hospital become unsafe for treating patients. We now need to plan and prepare for the catastrophic failure of our buildings, which could mean moving patient care into temporary buildings."

Dr Marsh extended an invitation to Health Secretary Wes Streeting to visit the hospitals and witness the deteriorating state of the facilities firsthand:

"If the health secretary thinks we can continue to care for patients for 10 years in this building, we invite Wes Streeting to come and see the state of the estate himself."

Financial Burden of Delays

The financial impact of the delays has been severe. According to the Trust, inflation and the cost of maintaining outdated buildings have driven up expenses by £150 million annually. These costs are expected to rise further as the timeline for the new hospital stretches into the 2030s.

The Trust's frustration echoes broader concerns from healthcare leaders across the country. NHS Providers interim Chief Executive Saffron Cordery described the delays as "a bitter pill to swallow," while Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the NHS

Confederation, warned that prolonged delays would result in higher costs and increased pressure on services.

The Plan for the New Hospital

Despite these setbacks, the Trust remains committed to its "Building Your Future Hospitals" programme. The plan aims to consolidate six major acute services—including A&E, maternity, and paediatrics—into the new Sutton facility, while upgrading Epsom and St Helier hospitals to provide enhanced outpatient, diagnostic, and rehabilitation services. Both existing hospitals will retain 24/7 urgent treatment centres to support local needs.

Call for Action

The delays to the New Hospital Programme have fuelled local frustration, with many questioning the Government's commitment to fulfilling its promises. As Dr Marsh emphasized, the cost of inaction is not just financial but could also jeopardize the safety and quality of care for thousands of patients.

For further details on the Trust's plans and timelines, visit Building Your Future Hospitals. Images of the facilities, illustrating their current state, are available alongside video footage upon request.

Related reports:

Prime Minister and Health Secretary Visit Epsom Hospital to Unveil NHS Recovery Blueprint

Has Epsom's new MP missed the bus to a new hospital?

Epsom and St Helier Hospitals in Desperate Need of Repairs

Public meeting about Epsom Hospital future

Epsom Hospital upgrade at risk?

Image: St Helier Hospital

Epsom & Ewell FC knocked out by narrow loss

VCD Athletic 1-0 Epsom and Ewell FC. Isuzu F.A. Vase - Fourth Round. Saturday 18th January.

After four home wins in the competition, we departed the F.A. Vase in our first away tie at high-flying VCD Athletic by a goal to nil, which on the balance of play it was hard to disagree with. However, our boys battled all the way in this match, only to be concede midway through the first half and the home side then defended that lead cleverly, showing good organisation and experience to break up the play when necessary and to keep us at arm's length from that point. As a result, the Vickers can be added to a small list of clubs alongside Eastbourne United, Hailsham Town and Long Buckby who have ended our interest in the Vase at the last 32 stage in the fifty years since we reached the inaugural final.

In terms of personnel and from looking at our bench, it looks like we are getting back to full strength, which is just as well bearing our League position and the upcoming challenges we face in that and the other two cups we remain in. Additionally, Dan O'Donovan returned between the posts after completing his suspension. Conrad Essilfie-Conduah, Ethan Nelson-Roberts and Nicolas Bostan returned to the starting eleven after our last match against Berks County, while Craig Dundas moved into a role further forward in place of the cup-tied Jason Bloor.

170 spectators were present on a chilly afternoon at Old Road and both teams opened up with half-chances. Kionte Gillfillian-Waul sent a dangerous ball into the danger area, but it was cleared, while at the other end Bostan made a good block for a corner. In the ninth minute Will Kendall was fouled close to the edge of the penalty area, and as Kendall and Ali Fofahan stood around the ball, I was surprised to see that our Captain Adam Green didn't appear to be involved, but found out soon after as Kendall tapped the ball across to him, leaving him with a more central angle for the shot, but it was blocked and the chance was gone. I appreciate the variety here, but this was a really good opportunity to test the keeper with our first set piece and it just didn't work. As it turned out, this would be the best chance we would get in the match.

We had a scare in the 14th minute when a foul by Essilfie-Conduah out wide gave the home side a chance to deliver the ball in and O'Donovan reached it at full stretch, only to then drop it at the feet of a striker. It happened too quickly for him to react though and the ball struck him and headed goalwards, where Niall Stillwell was well positioned to clear it off the goal line.

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We had an opportunity on the twenty minute mark when the VCD keeper Andy Walker sent a clearance straight to Fofahan, who then found Dundas, but from twenty yards he was unable to keep his shot down. Three minutes later though, we were behind after Bostan was adjudged to have committed a foul out wide in the middle of our half, but the free kick seemed to go straight through a crowd of players and was met at the far post by Michael Fenn who smashed the ball into the net off the crossbar. I thought it had stayed out at first, but it was not to be.

This was obviously not good news. Particularly when you realise that we have only come from behind to win on one occasion this season out of the eleven wins we have registered, which took place about a mile away from this ground at Phoenix Sports back in August. This would be a real mountain to climb.

Ollie Freeman was next to try his luck with a stinging shot from close to twenty-five yards out, but O'Donovan pulled off a superb save to fingertip the ball over the bar, while our chances were of a less threatening manner. A Green corner was punched away by Walker straight to Kendall, but his shot flew over the bar from the edge of the area. On another day it might have gone in the top corner, but we were unable to punish them and Bostan had to make another great block at the other end as the home side threatened to extend their lead. We went off at the break trailing by the one goal.

An early opportunity for the hosts just missed our post before we registered our first shot on target in the 55th minute when Essilfie-Conduah's shot took a slight deflection on the way but Walker was able to make the save. We nearly had a chance just after that when Kendall's ball in from the right wing seemed destined to be met by the head of Dundas, only for the VCD Captain Ben Fitchett to get the faintest touch to it and deflect it away. Fitchett had clearly been detailed to keep an eye on our experienced midfielder and did an excellent job throughout the match.

We picked up a couple of yellow cards with Gillfillian-Waul being most upset by the decision, and then made a pair of substitutions with Carl Oblitey and Luke Miller coming on, but we were unable to create much, although we did get one more opportunity when Kendall robbed a defender and set up Essilfie-Conduah, but our man was out wide and was unable to thread the needle; the ball nestling in the side netting instead.

As the game entered the closing minutes we were indebted to O'Donovan who made a good block after a striker had broken through on the left and run in on goal. We were unable to equalise though, which was a shame as any Salts supporter who had seen our penalties in our shoot out victory over Berks County would have fancied our chances. During the last week I cautioned our club against publicising our penalties from that match online, but this was ignored, and it was interesting to see that Walker had his water bottle in the goal covered with penalty notes, and it is to be hoped that our opponents in the two cups we remain in are not minded to look at our "official" social media channels, as for the first time in ages they might see something of relevance! VCD Athletic now have the excitement of a home tie against Hartpury University or Fareham Town in the next round, although I should point out that the previous three teams that knocked us out at this stage of the Vase went out in the last 16, so they will need to buck that particular trend!

Back in 2010/11 we departed the FA Vase at home to the favourites St Neots Town who fought back to lead us 2-1 and then promptly snuffed out the game, giving us very little to work with. This match felt a bit like that, particularly in the second half and sometimes you just have to admit that we were beaten by the better team. They will face harder challenges, but I wouldn't be totally surprised if VCD Athletic were walking out at Wembley Stadium in a few months.

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Niall Stillwell, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Nicolas Bostan, Callum Wilson, Ali Fofahan, Conrad Essilfie-Conduah, Will Kendall, Craig Dundas, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Luke Miller for Gillfillian-Waul (67), Carl Oblitey for Dundas (67), Jack Torbett for Kendall (90)

Epsom Jazz Club Brings Top Talent to Town

Epsom is swinging to the sound of jazz, thanks to the Epsom Jazz Club – a not-for-profit community project dedicated to bringing Nationally and Internationally renowned jazz musicians to the heart of Epsom. Situated at The Comrades Club, The Parade, Epsom, this intimate venue promises an unbeatable jazz experience, offering a warm welcome to all.

The club, a subsidiary of the registered charity Epsom Music, operates with the sole aim of promoting live music. Other than essential costs like venue hire and promotions, all ticket revenues go directly to the talented musicians. Any surplus funds are reinvested into enhancing the experience for concert-goers.

With no membership required and a strict capacity limit of just 70 seats - all arranged cabaret-style - everyone gets a great view and the same fair ticket price. Epsom Jazz Club is a rarity in its field: no booking fees, no tiered pricing, and not a raffle ticket in

sight!

Upcoming Events to Mark on Your Calendar

Thursday 23rd January 7.30pm - Steve Fishwick & Leon Greening Present SoulTime!

The first event of 2025 kicks off with a spectacular tribute to Bobby Timmons, the legendary pianist, composer, and sideman to jazz greats like Art Blakey and Cannonball Adderley. Trumpet maestro Steve Fishwick and pianist Leon Greening – hailed as the club's finest pianist to date – lead the evening alongside bass and drums. Expect soulful melodies and toe-tapping grooves in a night that jazz aficionados won't want to miss.

27th February - Coloriage: Accordion Meets Tango and Gypsy Jazz

February brings the enchanting sounds of Mike Guy on accordion and Harry Diplock on guitar, exploring the legacy of Richard Galliano. This quartet will take audiences on a journey through Argentine tango, French musette, and gypsy jazz, with works from Astor Piazzolla and Django Reinhardt. It's a rare treat for fans of accordion-led ensembles.

27th March - Sharp Little Bones with Tony Kofi

A saxophone showcase awaits in March with the award-winning Tony Kofi leading the invigorating modern post-bop quartet. Fresh from a sold-out London Jazz Festival performance, Kofi's appearance is a must-see for lovers of dynamic, contemporary iazz.

Join the Jazz Community

Epsom Jazz Club is open to everyone, whether you're a lifelong jazz lover or new to the genre. The "Ronnie Scott's" like venue, central location near bus stops and the railway station, and welcoming atmosphere make it the perfect spot for a night of live music.

Tickets are available exclusively via TicketSource

The charity also supports a national appeal providing grants to small struggling jazz clubs up and down the country led by Epsom's own jazz legend Nige Price.

Local Plan lessons from a Surrey borough?

Precious green belt sites could be at risk of speculative developments and Waverley Borough Council could be powerless to stop them after its biggest housing project was judged to be taking too long to build.

All planning authorities must demonstrate they can provide enough land to supply housing for five years.

If they don't they can become vulnerable to speculative applications and can lose control over where new homes are built – and may have to approve applications they would normally refuse.

Waverley Borough Council has been hit by a double whammy of increased housing targets by the Government and the Planning Inspectorate's decision to pull the 2600-home Dunsfold Park from its projections over its "development trajectory".

This has left the council running out of earmarked land for new homes in just two and a half years.

The situation gets even worse when the new Government's increased housing targets are added into the fold, bringing the figure down to just one and a half years.

The figures were published in a Waverley Borough Council position statement last November following the Planning Inspector's Dunsfold Park ruling.

It read: "The site has been discounted from the council's five year housing land supply by Planning Inspectors in recent appeals and for this reason, the council has decided to exclude the site from the five year supply until there is more certainty about the timescales for delivery of housing on the site."

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The plan has been to redevelop the aerodrome to form a new garden village on the brownfield site.

Planning permission for the first stage of the project was originally granted by the Secretary of State in March 2018. Its infrastructure is expected to support other developments in the borough.

So far "not one home" has been built.

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Conservative opposition group on Waverley Borough Council, criticised the borough for not publicising the change more widely saying residents deserved to know what was happening.

She said: "These housing supply figures are utterly dire and will mean more opportunistic development in inappropriate locations."

"We may as well just hand over the keys to opportunistic developers for any of the borough's green fields without some kind of national planning protection over them. I am extremely concerned about what this means for Alfold and edge of town sites across the borough."

Surrey County Councillor for Waverley Eastern Villages Kevin Deanus added: "Since Dunsfold Park gained planning consent in 2018 not one home has been constructed.

"Meanwhile local villages like Alfold have doubled in size. Major planning permissions in the local area have been granted dependent on infrastructure upgrades delivered via the Dunsfold Park permission.

"We now have raw sewage coming out of the ground in Alfold and huge pressure on local roads and infrastructure. Local people are despairing."

Councillor Liz Townsend, Waverley Borough Council portfolio holder for planning and economic development said they remained fully committed to delivering sustainable housing that meets the needs of the community while challenging unjustified and unrealistic targets imposed by the Government.

Dunsfold Park had originally been included in the 2018 Local Plan when the council was under Conservative control and was one of several sites identified to meet housing needs.

She said: "While the council sets the framework for development, it is important to clarify that we do not have the power to compel developers to build homes once planning permissions are granted. As of now, planning permission has been granted for around 5,000 homes across Waverley.

"However, this is no longer sufficient to meet our five-year housing land supply target, primarily due to significant increases in government-mandated targets.

"Originally set at 590 homes per year, this skyrocketed to 710 homes under the previous government, and now to an extraordinary 1,481 homes per year under current government policies.

"This cumulative target amounts to a staggering 29,000 homes over the next 20 years — effectively requiring the construction of an additional Farnham and Godalming within the borough, which is entirely unfeasible.

"Waverley Borough Council has made robust representations to the Government, including direct appeals to the Deputy Prime Minister, outlining why the housing need calculations are flawed. To date, these concerns have been ignored.

"We are actively working with the promoters of Dunsfold Park and other developers to accelerate delivery.

"However, Government Planning Inspectors have questioned the certainty of delivery on the Dunsfold site within the next five years.

As a result, the council has been forced to remove this site from its short-term housing projections, although this position will be continuously reviewed.

"The council is working urgently to develop a new Local Plan that ensures sustainable housing, job creation, and critical infrastructure.

"This is the only mechanism available to justify a more realistic housing target. Claims that the council is not fulfilling its obligations or has alternative options are factually incorrect.

"We are committed to addressing the national housing crisis while balancing the need to protect our borough's character and environment. However, it is the Government's disproportionate and unrealistic housing targets—not a lack of action by the council—that are placing immense pressure on local authorities across the country.

"Waverley Borough Council will continue to advocate for realistic and sustainable solutions to meet housing needs while standing



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firm against policies that jeopardise the future of our communities."

Image: Waverley Borough Council (Chris Caulfield)