# Epsom and Ewell's MP leads debate on support for Explosive Ordnance Disposers

**Helen Maguire**, Epsom and Ewell's MP and former British Army Military Police Officer, led a Westminster Hall debate 11th December on government support for the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) community. Drawing on her military experience and recent meetings with EOD specialists, Ms Maguire highlighted the critical importance of supporting this sector, both domestically and globally.

The motion read: "That this House believes that the United Kingdom's capacity in explosive weapons disposal and victim assistance requires utmost government support, particularly at a time of extreme geopolitical unrest."

Ms Maguire emphasised the UK's "enviable global reputation" for expertise in EOD, victim assistance, and the production of demining equipment. She also underscored the extensive humanitarian work supported by the UK, citing the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Global Mine Action Programme, which has a budget of £14.8 million for 2023-24. This programme tackles landmines, cluster munitions, and explosive remnants of war in countries such as Ukraine, Angola, and Cambodia.

Ms Maguire remarked, "Explosive weapons are being used in modern conflicts to an extent we haven't seen for generations. The number of civilian casualties has increased by 70% in three years, with Ukraine and the Middle East being major contributors." She also noted the challenges faced in Ukraine, where over 150,000 square kilometres of land is contaminated with unexploded ordnance, requiring decades of work to make safe.

### **Domestic Challenges and Veterans' Welfare**

Highlighting domestic issues, Ms Maguire praised the UK's EOD teams, who handle around 2,300 incidents annually, ranging from unexploded World War II bombs to improvised explosive devices. She also paid tribute to the bravery of EOD personnel, describing their work as a testament to "courage as a decision."

The debate touched on the impact of explosive weapons on civilians and veterans alike. Ms Maguire called for sustained government support for injured veterans, including those with prosthetic limbs. Referring to pioneering research at institutions like Imperial College London, she advocated for better resources and protective equipment, particularly for female deminers.

She stated, "For those of us who have served, many of us will know people who were killed or injured by explosive ordnance. Supporting veterans and civilians is not just a duty; it is a moral imperative."

#### The Global Context

Ms Maguire provided an alarming overview of global challenges, noting that "aggressors throughout history have never let the rules of war or international prohibition interrupt a good night's sleep." She stressed the UK's unique position to lead in international donor coordination and post-conflict reconstruction.

Ms Maguire also underscored the economic benefits of mine clearance, which unlocks agricultural land and restores livelihoods. She cited Lebanon as an example, where demining has enabled safer farming and improved access to water.

The MP called for innovation in demining technologies, such as drone-mounted ground-penetrating radar and chemical signature analysis. She also highlighted the need for better coordination in Ukraine, where demining equipment often sits unused due to licensing and training gaps.

### **Building Awareness and Collaboration**

Ms Maguire announced plans to form an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on explosive weapons, aiming to enhance support for EOD and victim assistance. She extended an invitation to colleagues and stakeholders to join the initiative. Referencing the TV series *Trigger Point*, she suggested its star, Vicky McClure, could help raise awareness about the vital work of EOD teams.

#### Government Minister's response:

The Minister expressed gratitude to the EOD community, stating: "Our EOD operators are highly trained, and they're world-renowned, equipped to deal with a full range of explosive threats... They deserve our absolute appreciation and thanks from the government, from Parliament, and indeed, the entire country."

The Minister highlighted the scale of the UK's EOD operations, mentioning that: "700 service personnel from the Army, Royal Navy, and RAF deal with 2,300 EOD incidents across the UK annually."

The economic and diplomatic significance of EOD was underlined: "EOD capabilities also have an important economic legacy. They feed our scientific and industrial base, sustain cutting-edge design in robotics and detection technologies, and contribute to international diplomacy and reconstruction."

The Minister emphasised evolving threats, such as drone-deployed munitions and advanced IEDs, and committed to ensuring the UK remains prepared: "We must invest in EOD capabilities to ensure we stay ahead of emerging threats and technologies."

He noted that the UK is aiding Ukraine by training personnel and sharing lessons learned. Regarding mine contamination in Ukraine, he stated: "This is not a problem that will go away today; it will last a generation."

The Minister reaffirmed the government's commitment to veterans: "You have my word that I will support veterans, both legally and with welfare support, particularly those from Northern Ireland."

Related report (Westminster Debate)

Grayling's fishy business

Image Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. Bundeswehr-Fotos

## Woking child murder lessons for Surrey's agencies

Authorities must face serious questions about years of missed chances to prevent Sara Sharif's death.

Sara was murdered aged 10 years old by her father Urfan Sharif and stepmother Beinash Batool. Her uncle Faisal Malik was convicted of causing or allowing her death.

Local authorities are legally responsible for looking after and safeguarding all children, they also have a statutory duty to investigate concerns about welfare. A local child safeguarding practice review will be carried out to examine the missed opportunities and if more could have been done to prevent Sara's death.

Rachael Wardell, Executive Director for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning at Surrey County Council, said: "We are resolute in our commitment to protecting children, and we are determined to play a full and active part in the forthcoming review alongside partner agencies, to thoroughly understand the wider circumstances surrounding Sara's tragic death."

The safeguarding review will bring together the police, social carers, education and health services amongst others to consider the practice of all the agencies involved with the family to identify any learning. The safeguarding review, led by an independent author, will also look at all professionals who had contact with the family.

Unlike a trial or coroner hearing, the review will not hold individuals or organisations to account but looks at how general system change can prevent or reduce the risk of similar instances.

"The focus of the trial has been on the evidence needed to secure the convictions of those responsible for Sara's death," Ms Wardell said. "This means that until the independent safeguarding review concludes, a complete picture cannot be understood or commented upon."

Her father had multiple and repeated contact with Surrey Police and social services before he was charged with murdering the 10-year-old girl last summer. Just a few months before, Sara's school referred her to social services but the case was closed within days.

After the guilty verdicts, and opening the safeguarding review, the case will provoke difficult questions whether Sara's tragic death could have been prevented.

Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza said the case highlighted a "profound weaknesses in our child protection system". She called for a raft of changes including "proper oversight" for children, like Sara, being home schooled.

Dame Rachel said: "There can be no doubt that Sara was failed in the starkest terms by the safety net of services around her. Even before she was born, she was known to social care – and yet she fell off their radar so entirely that by the time she died, she was invisible to them all.

"We can have no more reviews, no more strategies, no more debate. When we say 'never again', we have to mean it - let that be

#### Sara's legacy."

As Sara started school, her abuse went largely undetected or unactioned. The court heard Sara turned up at school with bruises on her face in June 2022 and again in March 2023, despite attempts to cover them in a hijab.

Although Sara never confided in teacher what was going on, a referral was made to Surrey County Council's social services after the second incident- only to be shut down within days, the court heard.

By April 2023, Sara was taken out of school and the violence against the 10-year-old girl escalated in the final weeks of her life. Sharif admitted to the court he repeatedly beat her with a cricket bat, metal pole and mobile phone, throttling her and even hit her in the stomach while she lay dying.

Responding to the verdict, Ms Wardell from Surrey County Council said: "Sara's death is incredibly distressing and we share in the profound horror at the terrible details that have emerged during the trial. We cannot begin to comprehend the suffering that poor Sara endured at the hands of members of her family who should have loved, protected, and cared for her."

"What is clear from the evidence we've heard in court is that the perpetrators went to extreme lengths to conceal the truth from everyone."

# Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in

On 10th December 2024, the **Full Council of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** convened to debate the proposed Local Plan, a pivotal document that will shape the borough's future planning, housing, and Green Belt policies until 2040 and beyond. Central to the debate were contentious issues regarding housing targets, the timetable for the Local Plan submission, and the potential release of Green Belt land for development. The controversial Local Plan, including some Green Belt development, was voted through by 16 votes from a Council that consists of 35 Councillors.

#### **Presentation of the Petition**

The meeting began with the presentation of a petition organized by **Yvonne Grunwald**, titled "Remove Green Belt from the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Local Plan." Mrs. Greenwald argued the case against developing on Green Belt land:

"Over the last few years, residents have repeatedly told the Council that they do not want building on the Green Belt. They have held rallies, protests, they have spoken at council meetings. This includes secondary school children. They've sent emails to councillors and their MP... The results showed that 87% of respondents were opposed to building on the Green Belt."

#### She criticized the council's perceived disregard for public opinion:

"Why consult with the residents if you are going to ignore the result and actively undermine them?"

#### Mrs. Greenwald also pointed to an alternative plan that relied solely on brownfield sites:

"In November, opposition parties and the Green Party, together with residents, submitted an alternative plan, which showed that enough houses can be built on brownfield sites already identified by the Council."

#### Concluding her speech, she urged the Council to act quickly to amend the plan:

"You must make sure that the Local Plan doesn't include Green Belt... This should happen as quickly as possible so that it can be submitted to examination before the new NPPF rules come into force."

#### **Council Debate**

Councilor **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, responded to the petition. He acknowledged the concerns raised but defended the inclusion of Green Belt land in the Local Plan as a necessary compromise:

"The proposed submission plan... aims to strike the right balance of meeting development needs, including much-needed affordable housing, against protecting the borough's Green Belt and character of the urban area, both of which are important to our residents."

#### He warned of the risks of removing Green Belt sites from the plan:

"Officers consider that removing sites from the Local Plan would significantly increase the risk of the plan being found unsound at the examination stage. If our Local Plan is found to be unsound, we will have to restart the process again, meaning we will be without an up-to-date Local Plan for longer."

Councillor **Julie Morris** (Lib Dem College) expressed her sympathy for the petition's intentions but highlighted the challenges of late-stage changes:

"The problem with this petition is that it's quite late in the day. Whilst I have every sympathy with its intentions and what it says, it's actually quite difficult to implement that right now. You know, 12 months, 18 months ago, it would have been a different scenario."

Councilor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) strongly opposed the inclusion of Green Belt land in the Local Plan, emphasizing the importance of protecting such spaces:

"Releasing high-quality Green Belt should be avoided at any time... Without this housing, our homeless levels will grow, not reduce. Releasing high-quality Green Belt without achieving a very significant benefit by doing so would be contrary to the NPPF and totally unacceptable."

Councilor Clive Woodbridge (RA Ewell Village) cautioned against removing Green Belt sites, citing the experience of Elmbridge Council:

"Elmbridge... submitted a Local Plan with no Green Belt and a multiplicity of smaller brownfield sites. They are now faced with the option of either withdrawing it or having it found unsound. The inspector argued that the brownfield-only approach adopted would fail to deliver anything near the level of need for the planned period."

#### Final Debate on the Draft Local Plan

When the draft Local Plan was introduced, Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) summarized the difficult position faced by the Council:

"Nobody wants to build on Green Belt, but there is not enough brownfield land. The risk is that this won't be accepted, and we'll be in even bigger trouble."

Councillor Jan Mason (RA Ruxley) criticized the concentration of development in certain areas:

"You're talking about the most densely populated part of this borough. This isn't well thought out... There will only be harm."

Councillor Chris Ames, (Labour Court) condemned the lack of affordable housing:

"This plan... will only deliver just over 1,000 affordable homes... fewer than 400 social rented homes by 2040. This is not sound."

#### **Clive Woodbridge** defended the plan as a balanced approach:

"It delivers badly needed homes while protecting most of the Green Belt and maintaining the character of our borough."

#### Outcome of the Vote

The Council ultimately voted on the draft Local Plan without amendments. The majority supported the plan, although several councillors abstained or voted against it. Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**'s remarks highlighted the Council's predicament:

"This is the plan we have in front of us, and this is what we need to vote on today."

Those opposing the plan, like Councillor Jan Mason, stood firm in their dissent:

"I'm personally against this plan... This isn't something that will suit Ruxley and West Ewell."

#### Conclusion

The Full Council's debate underscored deep divisions over the Local Plan. While the plan's supporters argued it represented a necessary compromise to meet government targets and protect the borough's future, its critics condemned the perceived sacrifice of Green Belt land and insufficient affordable housing. The council's approval of the draft plan marked a critical step forward, but the contention surrounding it suggests continued challenges as the plan progresses to examination.

The Voting: 16 FOR, 8 Against and 7 Abstentions.

### **Councillors Who Voted FOR:**

- Arthur Abdulin, Residents' Association, Town Ward
- Steve Bridger, Residents' Association, Stamford Ward
- Neil Dallen, Residents' Association, Town Ward
- Liz Frost, Residents' Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward
- Shanice Goldman, Residents' Association, Nonsuch Ward
- Rachel King, Residents' Association, Town Ward
- Robert Leach, Residents' Association, Nonsuch Ward
- Steven McCormick, Residents' Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward
- Phil Neale, Residents' Association, Cuddington Ward
- Peter O'Donovan, Residents' Association, Ewell Court Ward
- Humphrey Reynolds, Residents' Association, West Ewell Ward
- Alan Williamson, Residents' Association, West Ewell Ward
- Clive Woodbridge, Residents' Association, Ewell Village Ward
- John Beckett, Residents' Association, Auriol Ward

- Hannah Dalton, Residents' Association, Stoneleigh Ward
- Chris Watson, Residents' Association, Ewell Court Ward

#### Councillors Who Voted AGAINST:

- Rob Geleit, Labour, Court Ward
- Christine Howells, Residents' Association, Nonsuch Ward
- Alison Kelly, Liberal Democrat, Stamford Ward
- James Lawrence, Liberal Democrat, College Ward
- Bernie Muir, Conservative, Horton Ward
- Kieran Persand, Conservative, Horton Ward
- Julie Morris, Liberal Democrat, College Ward
- Jan Mason, Residents Association, Ruxley Ward

#### **Councillors Who ABSTAINED:**

- Chris Ames, Labour, Court Ward
- Kate Chinn, Labour, Court Ward
- Christine Cleveland, Residents' Association, Ewell Village Ward
- Bernice Froud, Residents' Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward
- Tony Froud, Residents' Association, Stoneleigh Ward
- Darren Talbot, Residents' Association, Auriol Ward
- Graham Jones, Residents' Association, Cuddington Ward

#### Procedural criticisms and more:

The **Epsom Green Belt Group** has raised significant concerns regarding the procedural handling of the Local Plan by the Residents Association-led council. They argue that the process lacked transparency and adequate opportunities for scrutiny.

In their press release, the Group stated:

"For almost two years, since the regulation 18 consultation in early 2023, the public has been waiting to see what would be included in the Local Plan, whilst lobbying for the protection of the Green Belt, submitting a 10,000-member petition, holding rallies and writing to councillors. Requests were made to discuss the Local Plan and the treatment of Green Belt in the fourth quarter of 2023, in July 2024, and in September 2024. Nothing was shared, and nothing debated until November 2024."

This lack of earlier discussion and public involvement was also echoed during the Full Council meeting. Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) highlighted the limited opportunities for councillors to engage in substantive discussions:

"There have been cases where we could have been involved, such as after the briefings. There's nothing wrong with having briefings, but those were never brought into the public domain until a few weeks ago."

The Group also pointed to restrictions on questioning during the December 2024 Full Council meeting, which they argued severely limited proper scrutiny of the Local Plan. They noted that only five questions were permitted in total, with some councillors, such as Councillor Mason, restricted from raising further queries, and others, like Councillor Lawrence, unable to pose any additional questions. Councillor Mason's frustration was evident:

"I had more to ask about the Green Belt allocations and the housing numbers, but I was told I had used up my chance. How is this adequate scrutiny for a plan that decides the future of this borough for 16 years?"

Additionally, the Group criticized the Residents Association for missing the opportunity to submit the Local Plan under the existing National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) guidelines, which would have allowed for greater flexibility in protecting the Green Belt. They claim that the refusal to expedite the Local Plan's preparation has exposed the borough to heightened housing targets under new rules.

Councillor **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) expressed the challenge of navigating a rapidly changing regulatory landscape but stopped short of endorsing the Group's criticism of delays:

"We've got numbers that have changed. We've got new government ambitions. We want to build affordable and social housing. Whatever we do, it's not going to satisfy everybody. That is the nature of Local Plans."

The Group also accused the council of opening the floodgates for further Green Belt development by including high-quality Green Belt sites in the Local Plan. Councilor O'Donovan, however, defended the approach as a necessary trade-off:

"By including a small portion of Green Belt in the plan, we ensure protections for the rest. Without a Local Plan in place, developers will have greater freedom to target any Green Belt site."

### Surrey first in image AI

#### Surrey announces world's first AI model for near-instant image creation on consumer-grade hardware

A groundbreaking AI model that creates images as the user types, using only modest and affordable hardware, has been announced by the Surrey Institute for People-Centred Artificial Intelligence (PAI) at the University of Surrey.

The model, NitroFusion, represents a world first and has been made open source by its developers – SketchX, a lab within PAI – a move that fundamentally transforms access to AI-enabled image creation models for creative professionals.

Professor Yi-Zhe SonG, Director of SketchX and Co-Director of PAI, said:

"NitroFusion represents a paradigm shift in making AI accessible to everyone, eliminating the need for large compute resources and the long waiting times between prompt and result that are common with most image generation platforms."

Typically, similar technology is available only to corporate giants with vast computing resources. However, NitroFusion runs on a single consumer-grade graphics card – marking a decisive step forward in bringing advanced AI capabilities to individual creators, small studios, and educational institutions. The almost instant creation of images allows rapid artistic iterations and greater control over the generated imagery.

Dar-Yen Chen, the PhD researcher who helped to develop the project at PAI, said:

"NitroFusion leverages a novel dynamic adversarial framework that works like a panel of specialised art critics, each evaluating different aspects of the generated image to ensure high quality in a single step. The system's flexible architecture allows users to optionally use between one to four refinement steps, providing direct control over the balance between generation speed and image quality."

Professor SonG added:

"With NitroFusion, we're not just releasing another image generation model - we're pioneering an entirely new approach which democratises AI interaction.

"Following our DemoFusion release last year, which provided a new way to upscale AI-generated images, this innovation further establishes our position at the forefront of making powerful AI technology accessible to all."

This breakthrough delivers multiple leaps for the users and industry:

- Instant image generation that responds as users type a first in the field enabling rapid iteration, greater control
  and better experimentation
- Improved sustainability through greatly reduced energy consumption
- Consumer-grade affordable hardware requirements (e.g. a single high-performance GPU) that mean individuals and small studios can create imagery affordably
- Open-source availability enables global innovation, adaptation and variations
- No cloud dependencies or subscription fees.

Professor Adrian Hilton, Director of the Institute for People-Centred AI at the University of Surrey, said:

"We believe we're the first in the world to achieve interactive image generation at this scale and efficiency. This opens up access to state-of-the-art AI for image generation and is just the beginning of our commitment to democratising creative AI tools. Our Institute will continue to develop open-source, groundbreaking technologies that put professional-grade AI capabilities into the hands of creators everywhere.

"We're particularly proud of the great work that our SketchX Lab, creating new concepts and advancing the science of generative AI. Our research is focused on ensuring that the future of creative AI technology is inclusive, responsible and accessible to all, and we're keen to continue to work with organisations that share this ethos."

The technology is available immediately through https://chendaryen.github.io/NitroFusion.github.io/, with comprehensive documentation and community support resources.

## Surrey: Free school buses withdrawn

Free school buses are being axed after a cross-country route was judged safe by Surrey County Council. Parents say the letter outlining the new walkable route explicitly states that the "personal safety issues of children travelling alone" were not considered. About 81 children from Esher High School are said to be affected. Compounding the problem, the council has stated that further funding to increase capacity on regular bus services is not available.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service understands parents are appealing the decision and have been in touch with Surrey Police. This comes just weeks after parents in South Nutfield were told children could walk across open rail tracks and flood-prone cow fields as the county council looks to make further service cuts.

Children who live more than three miles from their nearest school are eligible for free buses. The new route across the heath reduces the distance to just under that mark, meaning the children no longer qualify for the service. The council says the move will save about £180,000 per year and create space on "stretched coach resources to provide travel assistance to those eligible."

One of the affected parents, Plamena Naydenova, received a letter that included directions on how her children could get to school, with 30 separate steps to follow. Among the instructions were phrases like "take the alleyway," "follow the footpaths through Molesey Heath Nature Reserve," and "turn right through the squeeze stile." Later, children are told to "cross the River Mole Viaduct Sluice."

Mrs. Naydenova said: "How can you call an 83-minute walk through dark heaths and unlit river paths a safe route? It's just honestly outrageous, the whole thing. It isn't about one child, it's a principle. It will affect many families, not just my two children. I walked it with my sister as I was afraid to walk it on my own. It goes through narrow alleyways, fields, mud along the embankment of the River Mole, with no fencing."

She added: "The bit that annoys me the most is the word safe—or safe for an accompanied child. Parents must accompany them, but the council doesn't see that other parents have other children to drop off or work commitments. I would need to leave the house at 7 a.m. to get to Esher. How would I get the other children to school, never mind my work commitments? It's very, very shocking. We all know it's about the money and cost-cutting. But be honest and transparent—say 'we can't afford to pay anymore,' not that there's a new safe route."

Since the shock email, parents have banded together. They understand about 81 other students have been impacted. Very few are expected to take on the route and, if their appeal fails, will instead use the standard bus network—although these services, she said, are often full, leaving school children at stops.

Mrs. Naydenova said: "It will put a lot of pressure on the existing paid buses. We aren't going to let them walk across the heath. We only have one car, so the only other option is cycling, but how safe is that?"

Travel assistance will run until the end of the school year, but from September 2025, children will need to find alternative routes unless there is a change.

Surrey County Council's cabinet member for children, families, and lifelong learning, Councillor Clare Curran, said the route to Esher High School was established following "individual safe walking route assessments" applied in line with national guidelines. She explained: "It is important to note that the guidelines consider the relationship between pedestrians and traffic, and assessments are undertaken on the assumption that the child will be accompanied by an appropriate adult if necessary. The Department for Education's own school transport guidance also supports this position. It is suggested that suitable footwear and a torch are used where needed."

She added: "The council provides contracted coaches to those eligible for travel assistance to Esher High School. By limiting the services only to those eligible in line with statutory guidance, the council expects a cost saving of approximately £180k per year, as well as the benefit of utilizing the stretched coach resources to provide travel assistance to those eligible. The national picture is of increased demand on transport services and therefore council budgets. We spent £64.9m in 2023/24 on home-to-school travel costs for around 10.7k children and young people.

"We take our responsibilities regarding home-to-school transport very seriously; however, we must balance this with our duty to ensure we are only using public funds for those who meet statutory guidelines for free transport or who are most in need of assistance. Amidst a set of challenging financial circumstances, the council is not in a position to continue to pay for transport for families where they are no longer eligible for assistance due to a safe route being established."

Related report:

Surrey school kids' country walk saving money

Image: Surrey County Council's recommended safe route to Esher High School (Palamena Naydenova)

## **Epsom Symphony Orchestra: A Cornerstone of Local Musical Excellence**

The Epsom Symphony Orchestra, a cherished fixture in the town's cultural landscape, has been delighting audiences since its founding in 1951. Over its decades-long history, the orchestra has shared the stage with numerous esteemed soloists, including pianists Phyllis Sellick, Eileen Joyce, and Semprini, clarinettist Gervase de Peyer, and, more recently, the internationally acclaimed pianist Benjamin Grosvenor.

Currently under the direction of its long-serving musical director **Darrell Davison**, the orchestra performs four concerts annually at the **Epsom Playhouse**. Mr. Davison, who has led the orchestra since 1981, brings an impressive musical pedigree to the role. A scholar of both Charterhouse and St Catherine's College, Cambridge, Davison began his career as the principal cellist of the Ulster Orchestra before transitioning to conducting. A winner of the Sir John Barbirolli Conducting Competition in 1979 and a prize winner at the inaugural Leeds Conducting Competition in 1984, Davison has conducted major ensembles across England, including all four London orchestras, and has appeared at venues such as the Royal Festival Hall.

The Epsom Symphony Orchestra comprises a blend of professional musicians and dedicated amateurs, creating a vibrant and inclusive musical community. Among its members is leader **Julia Burkert**, a German-born violinist who studied on scholarship in Canada and Scotland before establishing a successful freelance career in London. The orchestra's ethos of collaboration and shared passion for music resonates strongly with its members, many of whom describe it as a "musical family."

The orchestra recently performed its annual Christmas concert to a packed audience at the Playhouse. The festive program featured interactive elements that encouraged audience participation, adding to the warm and lively atmosphere. This year's Christmas concert continued a tradition of welcoming celebrity narrators for musical pantomimes, with past guests including Johnny Morris, Wayne Sleep, and Lionel Blair.

Looking ahead, the orchestra's next concert on 23rd March promises a compelling program of classical masterworks. Highlights include Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Overture*, Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with Cypriot pianist Christos Fountos as the soloist, and Shostakovich's emotionally charged Fifth Symphony. Mr. Fountos, born in Nicosia in 1997, began his piano studies at the age of five and made his orchestral debut at 17 with the Cyprus Symphony Orchestra.

The orchestra's commitment to nurturing local talent and delivering high-quality performances continues to enrich Epsom's cultural life. It is also actively seeking new players of a good standard to join its ranks, ensuring its legacy endures for years to come. For more information, prospective musicians and concertgoers are encouraged to visit the orchestra's website. http://www.epsomsymphony.co.uk/

Related report:

Spanish fiesta came to Epsom

### Rugby result reads well for Sutton & Epsom

Sutton & Epsom RFC 17 - Reeds Weybridge 11. Saturday 7th December 2024.

The arrival of Reeds Weybridge at Rugby Lane signalled the culmination of the first half of the season having played the other ten teams in the league in the previous rounds. The Whiteley Village outfit lay third in the table. It was an identical position to the same stage as last season but they enjoyed an improved record of eight wins and 40 points compared to seven wins and 32 points. In comparison, Sutton & Epsom are one win, two places and six points better off than the 2023-4 statistics. On the last occasion these teams met it was for the denouement of the season and S&E won by 12-10 with a late Rob Hegarty try. It was again a thrilling affair with Sutton triumphing 17-11 for their fifth win on the spin.

Storm Darragh had put paid to the game at Priestfields but that was the only postponement as Reeds kicked off with the clubhouse and a strong wind behind them. S&E had brought in Matt Symonds and Josh Rea to replace Jordan Huie and Jac Davies. Sam Lennie was elevated from the bench to make his first start as hooker with Dan Jones switching to the flank. The Black & Whites incurred an early injury when Callum Gibson was replaced by Tom Boaden within the opening ten minutes. The visitors enjoyed more of the possession and territory in the first quarter but the conditions and ferocious defence by all concerned limited opportunities. Reeds progress was additional hampered by frustrating penalties. On the half hour excellent Sutton defence turned over the ball in their 22 and Dan Jones broke the shackles with a stunning burst to halfway. RW responded in kind and won a penalty which they decided to kick for points. The reliable Jack Jesty opened their account for a 3-0 advantage.

From the restart Sutton were gifted the chance to level the scores but as is their wont they kicked to the corner in search of greater rewards. The gamble was justified as the forwards completed their primary task of securing possession. The war of attrition was declined in favour of spinning the ball wide. The ball was transferred adroitly to Angus Findlay who again demonstrated his increasing aptitude for scoring in the corner. Even for the prodigious Freddy Bunting a touchline conversion against the wind was beyond his scope but his side led 5-3. Reeds Weybridge sought to take advantage of the wind and kicked into the home 22 where a scrambling Gareth O'Brien escorted it to touch. Another chip ahead appeared to harmlessly roll dead but the referee brought play back for S&E pulling down the lineout. Jack Jesty stepped up to regain the lead at 6-5 in time added on. A feature of the match was the numerous injury breaks throughout and it meant Sutton had plenty of time to reply.

Having secured the restart Sam Lennie twice carried powerfully in the 22. It was the host's who now had a penalty that gained no advantage. Usually when the ball is brought back for an indiscretion the defence can reset whilst the offence carefully considers its options. On this occasion the RW team had overpopulated their left flank leaving their right as weak as the Ardennes in 1940. Gareth O'Brien was alert to the possibilities and took advantage of Sam Lennie as his decoy as he glided through the remnants of the defence to celebrate his 50th cap in style. Fredding Bunting accepted the extras after the minor inconvenience of replacing the ball on the tee. The Black & Whites led 12-6. There was still four more minutes of the additional eleven to go. The final Reeds attack was snuffed out by excellent smothering defence by Adam Bibby and Mr Carter finally ended the half with Sutton ahead by 12-6.

The second half began to recall striking parallels with the final fixture of last season. Formidable attacking waves crashing against adamantine defences. The hosts besieged the visitor's 22. The game was set on an endless loop with Sisyphus and Tantalus starring for Sutton and Horatio playing the lead for Reeds. The Black & Whites seemed bereft of the traditional timber equine solution. Recent clinical efficiency in their opponent's 22 was replaced by frustration against an impenetrable defence. The elements added a slightly comical note as the wind hampered clearance kicks of sufficient distance. However, the Reeds solution

of running a penalty 5 metres from their line and kicking to their wing was hardly a prosaic solution. It might require some training ground practice or only play that card on a still afternoon. The ball ended up being caught by Sutton as it descended near the Reeds' line in the corner.

Meanwhile for the Rugby Lane crowd the habit of declining the kickable three points was being questioned in the grandstand. As the game progressed the penalties became increasingly adjacent to the uprights. Fuelled by their libations the crowd implored, beseeched and vociferously heckled for a 9-point lead. The captain was impervious to the obsecrations of the mob. In gathering gloom with normal time evaporating the Sutton pack delivered at the eleventh hour. Tom Boaden forced his way over for the try to break the magnificent defence of the opposition. The Bunting conversion missed by inches as S&E held a 17-6 lead entering time added on. For the second half the crowd would enjoy 14 additional minutes.

It would have been easy for the Reeds Weybridge team to have been downcast after their Herculean defensive efforts had been thwarted so late in the game but they demonstrated tremendous team spirit to switch to the attacking mode. They were given a quick boost when Josh Rea received a yellow card for a high contact reducing Sutton to 14. Finally, they managed to create space and fullback Marcus Clark set off like a giraffe being released from captivity. He outpaced the initial cover and then stepped out of the covering tackle to complete a wonderful try from halfway. If Freddy Bunting's miss was unlucky then Jack Jesty's appeared to be cursed as it was blown narrowly astray at the last instant.

Trailing 11-17 Reeds threw everything at Sutton who did not help themselves by conceding numerous penalties. As inevitably as a game of amateur darts finishes with multiple efforts at double one this match was to conclude 5 metres from the Black & White line. Reeds resorted to their most powerful ball carriers to smash their way over. Sutton were equal to the task with a collective will and tremendous tackling. Finally, the defence employed the 'Irish Kiss' and prevented the Reeds man getting to the deck. Mr Carter awarded S&E the scrum and blew the final whistle to end a titanic struggle with Sutton & Epsom worthy winners by 17-11.

For the hosts the centre combination of Bunting and Bibby neutralised the potent opposition backs. Sam Lennie was mightily impressive with his throwing on a blustery afternoon and his penetrative carries. The pack to a man tackled ferociously and demonstrated admirable control in difficult conditions. Against a less resolute defence Sutton could have been out of sight. Once again the team impressed in the final moments with their heroic resistance by preventing a decisive score. Reeds failed to capitalise in the first period when they had the elements but the second half showed that a favourable wind does not guarantee points. In adversity Reeds Weybridge showed great character and no little skill first to survive and then to threaten to win the match.

Next Saturday Rugby Lane supporters can enjoy back-to-back home fixture with the 2pm game against Beckenham. The Kent team are enjoying another fine start to the season and are in pole position in the table. The visitors will be keen to repeat their 29-14 success at Blamoral Avenue in September. However, Sutton will be wanting to add another top of the league scalp to those of Sidcup and Medway whose colours have been downed at Rugby Lane already this campaign. Finally, hearty congratulations to Jo Evans who on Sunday in the match against Battersea Ironsides became the first Sutton woman to play 100 league matches. Jo has been a stalwart of this remarkably successful squad that has risen through the leagues to the exalted status of playing in the Women's Championship South 1 rubbing shoulders with the likes of Richmond, Bath and London Irish.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Symonds, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Boaden, Rea & Hilton.

Reeds Weybridge

Clark M, Brown, Maitland, Clark J, Endeley, Jesty, Palmer, Day L, Day R, Beavis, Goodwin, Finn ©, Ewington, Wasko & Wastie.

Replacements: Howe, Tyndale & Homfrey.

## A dog's dinner of a licensing scheme?

Professional dog walkers have rallied against a new dog licensing scheme in Surrey, claiming the managers have overstepped their mark.

Dog walkers may have to pay £360 a year to roam over the Surrey Hills from April 1, 2025. Banstead Common Conservators (BCC), which manage the four sites, said its main reason for setting up the scheme was for safety. The sites include Banstead Heath, Banstead Downs, Park Downs and Burgh Heath.

But those who rely on the open spaces are less convinced. Dog walkers have accused the BCC of "intimidating" and "abusive" behaviour on the heath. Members of the group have claimed the BCC management team have taken pictures of dog walkers without asking them, and told them to put dogs on the lead when the staff do not have authority to.

Emma, who has been a professional dog walker for seven years, said she now feels "anxiety stricken" going to the heath. She said: "Everytime we get out of the van there is fear that they will be waiting for you in the woods, following you."

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) understands that a handful of dog walkers were "walked off" the Heath last year by the management team for having more than four dogs. Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) introduced a scheme to limit dog walkers to only four in August 2024. The walkers say the BCC team acted outside their remit as this was during the grace period, before the rule came into effect, and not done by council enforcement officers.

Now, the dog walkers say the atmosphere on Banstead Heath is "horrible" and "really uncomfortable". One person said they feel that even though they are insured, professional and sticking to the rules, they are waiting for someone to make a remark.

A spokesperson for BCC said: "All of our engagement with any user of Banstead Commons is done with respect and in accordance with our statutory duties." The Conservators claim that regulating any commercial activity, like dog walking, is part of its legal duty under the Metropolitan Commons (Banstead) Supplemental Act of 1893.

They added that BCC has received no complaints relating to the behaviour of our staff from professional dog walkers and noted BCC staff will be issued with body worn cameras for their safety in future.

However, a council spokesperson said they have received some complaints about the management of Banstead Commons Conservators in the last 12 months, which are being reviewed."

Issues relating to controlling dogs have been on the agenda since 2022, with the BCC noting the significant increase in dog owners and commercial walkers. Given the frequency of people walking dogs (commercially or for leisure) over the years, issues of dogs scaring horses, attacking wildlife or littering poo bags have often appeared in the BCC agenda. The Conservators have often noted when a dog has attacked a horse or bitten a person, or tragically killed a woman.

Commercial dog walkers say they have been "kept in the dark" around the licensing scheme which impacts their livelihoods. They say the meeting minutes do not go into detail about what is being discussed, or, on one occasion, is moved to part 2. Although many of the paid dog walkers say they welcome a licensing scheme, they want it run by the council which owns the land.

According to the minutes of a meeting in November, the BCC can regulate for the "prevention of nuisances" on the Common which would include the ability to licence and ban certain activities.

Emma said: "Local dog walkers are simply not prepared to engage in this scheme based on the clandestine approach of how it manifested and the clear lack of respect and utter disdain they have for the profession."

The BCC has now published the agreement for the scheme which conditions license holders to "not to cause an annoyance or nuisance or interfere" with other people using the commons. The BCC states they are able to take licences away "with immediate effect" with a written notice if the person breaches the agreement, or does not remedy it in 21 days.

Professional dog walkers must walk with identification, issued by the BCC, on them at all times, according to the rules. Commercial walkers must allow any BCC staff member to read a dog's chip to establish a dog owner's details.

Emma said the fee is "extortionate" for just four sites, and not the whole of the borough. One of the dog walkers said they did not like the "piecemeal" approach.

Similar schemes are also being trialled in Surrey. Nonsuch Park, in Epsom, is running a pilot commercial dog licensing fee at £200 a year with a limit of six dogs walking at any one time. The licence will be managed by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council as well as the London Borough of Sutton Council.

A joint-statement by the Conservators read: "With the increasing volume of professional dog walkers, including displacement from other areas that have already implemented restrictions, it has become necessary to take the responsible step of licensing this activity.

"This scheme will help regulate the numbers of dogs being walked commercially on our sites and ensure that companies are operating safely and treating Banstead Commons, its users and wildlife with respect and consideration.

The BCC said "safety" was one of the "main drivers" for the dog licensing scheme. The group said the scheme will give professional dog walkers "visibility and confidence to operate safely" when using the sites, as well as reassuring other visitors.

The council announced last week that it is reviewing the dog walking limit after a petition calling out the "heavy-handed" nature of the approach. An RBBC spokesperson said: "Only the Council's enforcement team can enforce our PSPOs. Our enforcement

does not extend to the BCC's own licensing scheme. We will be requesting further information from BCC regarding the operation of their licensing scheme."

Four dogs in Banstead wood, ahead of the licensing scheme to be introduced. (Credit: Dog walker Emma)

Related reports:

Case for dog-walker regulation after death-mauling

Should Nonsuch Park go to the dogs?

Licensed to walk

# Ideas for empty Council premises in Reigate and Redhill

Calls to make use of empty town centre units could see charities and pop-up shops take over in Surrey towns as councillors ask for short-term leases to be made available on council owned buildings. Over £600k is spent every year on maintaining empty shops and offices in Reigate and Banstead borough, according to council data.

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) own several wholly or partially empty commercial properties which they have to pay expensive business rates, utility bills and insurance for. Half of business rates are absorbed by the council, with the other half sent to the central government.

Councillors found that £619k has been spent on the upkeep of vacant commercial units in the borough this year. Three quarters of this is spent on properties in Redhill, including the new Rise shopping centre and Wheatley Court on Cromwell Road.

Around £174k is spent every year on four completely empty properties, including Beech House in Reigate which has been vacant since 2021. The three-storey office block is now up for sale.

While some prime retail commercial units are sitting empty in Redhill town centre, Cllr Neha Boghani (Green Party) has proposed a "common sense" motion to put the spaces to work. She has suggested using short-term 'Meanwhile leases' to save the council from paying extortionate business rates by making the space available to volunteer groups until full rental for these buildings is agreed.

'Meanwhile' leases essentially allow for the temporary occupation of a retail unit in a town centre without the lengthy administrative and legal process. It means non-commercial occupiers, who would otherwise not be able to afford the rent, can take advantage of the site as soon as possible.

She said: "Let's open some of our empty spaces for Christmas on Meanwhile Leases. We could create space for community uses, for entertainment, to serve the most vulnerable and provide a decent size temporary venue until the Harlequin reopens. What's not to like?"

The Green Party has suggested the multiple empty spaces in The Light shopping centre, Redhill, could be used for Christmas charity appeals or community groups. They also referenced the Harlequin Theatre needing a new temporary venue, which the council could provide in one of the empty shops in the centre.

Although charities and voluntary organisations pay peppercorn rent on a prime location store, it is only for a short period of time while the landlord finds a permanent tenant. Charities are often faced with unpredictable funding streams which can make it difficult for them to operate, so having a short-term let could potentially add further uncertainty.

"This arrangement can create something out of nothing," the Green Party councillor said. "It could be put to good use to support the charities using the space for the short term."

The Reigate and Banstead Council executive will consider using temporary leases and its potential economic benefits at a future date.

Cllr Neha Boghani outside an empty retail unit in Redhill. (Credit: Green Party)

## Examination of a Surrey Borough's 2nd highest UK debt

The review into Spelthorne Borough Council's £1 billion debt and whether it is upholding its duty to provide best value to residents has been extended. In May, the government wrote to the heavily leveraged local authority, the second most indebted borough council in the country, over concerns surrounding its debt conditions and financial management arrangements. It has now written again to say it is extending its deadline until January 31, 2025, with the scope of the inspection remaining unchanged. The Government first began engaging with Spelthorne Borough Council in May 2022 over its capital risk, and the review covers concerns over how the council is governed, the strength of its audits, scrutiny and risk arrangements, and in particular its finances. Its debt is second only to bankrupt Woking among borough councils.

A Spelthorne Borough Council spokesperson said of the delay: "The snap general election earlier this year interrupted the appointment of the Best Value Inspection team. The delayed appointments have had a knock-on impact on the original timeline, which has resulted in this extension." The council's extremely high levels of debt and borrowing, as of March 2023, stood at £1.1 billion, which is 87.1 times the borough's core spending power (CSE) and 52.4 times its total service expenditure. By comparison, the average CSE for councils such as Spelthorne is 5.6. Spelthorne has followed a similar path to other Surrey authorities such as Woking, Runnymede, and Surrey Heath, borrowing vast amounts to fund regeneration projects in the hope of creating long-term revenues. Many councils have used this to stave off real-term cuts to their spending power and maintain services residents value. The problem arises, as in Woking's case, when local authorities can no longer afford to pay back their loans, or if income from the investments is too low. While Spelthorne Borough Council has not yet reached that stage, the Government is seeking assurances that its long-term position is secure.

Between December 2016 and August 2018, Spelthorne Borough Council bought eight investment properties for a cost of about £1 billion. It borrowed largely from the Public Works Loans Board to generate income that supports its revenue budget, enabling it to maintain a wide range of discretionary services. As of December 31, 2022, the council's total borrowing stood at some £1.1 billion, with £1.08 billion from the Public Works Loans Board—the same body that lent to Woking Borough Council and numerous others. The council plans to borrow a further £332 million between 2023 and 2027, with most of this spread across the next two financial years, and has set its authorised borrowing limit at £1.45 billion for the next four years. The Government has also highlighted a KPMG Public Interest Report on the council's 2017/18 accounts, published in November 2022, which raised concerns about Spelthorne's investments and stated the auditor's view that the authority acted unlawfully in borrowing to purchase three properties in 2017/18.

The vast majority of Spelthorne's property portfolio, 95 percent, consists of office buildings, with just ten tenants accounting for 75 percent of its lettings income, and one tenant—BP—providing £18 million in rental income annually. About half of its leases end within 10 years and 94 percent within 15 years, creating pressure to retain key tenants. This reliance was highlighted when the loss of a previous tenant resulted in a £4 million loss, including £2.4 million linked to a Russian-owned tenant affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A July 2023 report noted: "Although Spelthorne Borough Council has effective mitigations in place, this cannot provide complete protection. The loss of a major tenant can impair commercial income." The council is projected to face an income shortfall of £10 million over the next two years due to these challenges. Additionally, the devaluation of its assets adds to its risks. Spelthorne spent £952 million on eight major purchases that collectively were worth £882 million as of 2022, with only the Sunbury Business Park increasing in value, rising from £384 million to £387 million. However, this gain is overshadowed by losses, such as the Charter Building in Uxbridge, purchased for £135.98 million but valued at £99 million. These devaluations mean that if the council needs to sell assets, it could face a significant deficit.

Despite these challenges, the council insists that the rental income from its commercial property portfolio exceeds financing costs and contributes significantly to discretionary services. "Annually these contribute approximately £10 million net to the council's revenue budget, enabling the council to continue delivering services that would otherwise have to be cut, including valued services such as Meals on Wheels or community centres," stated a Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy report. The same report, titled the Spelthorne Borough Council Review of Debt/Investment Risk Profile July 2023, also warned of a significant budget deficit of £9.306 million projected over the next three financial years. Responding to the original best value review, a council spokesperson said: "We welcome the independent review and will work with the inspector and her team. This administration has taken many decisive and positive steps since the May 2023 election, including instigating a full external independent review of our commercial property portfolio. Additionally, we have reduced future borrowing requirements by nearly £200 million and are pursuing alternative ways to deliver more affordable housing. We will continue to work with (the



government) in an open and transparent way and look forward to receiving the findings of the report. The rental income received from our commercial property portfolio more than covers the financing costs and provides a significant contribution to support council services, additionally, there is a reserve to cover possible income variation in future years."

Related Reports:

Spelthorne in financial trouble

Spelthorne's neediest lose out on housing

Spelthorne's thorny property problems spelt out

Spelthorne Borough Council offices in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp