Epsom and Ewell's Draft Local Plan goes to Full Council

The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** met on 20th November 2024 to consider the draft Regulation 19 Local Plan amid a storm of public opposition and internal division. The meeting, attended by residents and a significant complement of councillors, highlighted the deep tensions over the inclusion of Green Belt sites for development.

After nearly seven years of delays, the draft Local Plan was endorsed by the LPPC, sending it to the Full Council for final approval in December. However, the debate exposed significant disagreement among councillors about the cost of achieving housing targets and the risk of sacrificing valued green spaces.

Public Pleas to Save the Green Belt

Three public speakers opened the meeting, delivering impassioned critiques of the draft Local Plan. **Janice Baker** accused councillors of abdicating their responsibility by deferring to officers' recommendations. Quoting directly from the meeting papers, she said, "Paragraph 3.46 states that removing Green Belt sites would significantly increase the risk of the plan being found unsound. In other words, you're being told not to think about changes. But I ask: where is democracy in this process? Stand up for residents, stand up for your duties."

Tim Murphy, a member of the Council for the Protection of Rural England, highlighted Horton Farm's ecological and strategic importance, labelling it "one of the highest-performing Green Belt sites in the borough." He challenged the committee directly: "The decision lies with you, not officers, not inspectors. You will be held responsible by residents for either protecting or destroying our Green Belt."

Finally, **Yvonne Grunwald** reminded councillors of the 11,000-signature petition submitted during the Regulation 18 consultation. "Eighty-seven percent of residents opposed building on the Green Belt," she said. "What happened to their voices? This plan will forever change the borough's character."

Councillor Perspectives: Frustration, Reluctance, and Division

The councillors' deliberations revealed starkly contrasting views, with many expressing unease about the Local Plan but accepting its necessity. Chair Cllr **Peter O'Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) opened by praising the officers' efforts, describing the plan as a delicate balance. "Our task," he said, "is to tread carefully between safeguarding the borough's unique character and ensuring future generations can thrive."

However, dissenting voices were prominent. Cllr **Christine Howells** (RA Nonsuch) passionately opposed the inclusion of Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena. "This is our Green Belt," she argued. "Once it's lost, there's no going back. Horton Farm is a critical environmental buffer and a floodplain. Its removal would set a precedent for the destruction of every other Green Belt site."

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) expressed broader discontent with the central government's housing targets. "Epsom has a population density five times the national average," he said. "Why must all the burden fall on us? We're being treated as a branch office for Westminster, not as an independent council."

In contrast, Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) reluctantly supported the plan, acknowledging the compromises it entailed. "I wrestled with this decision," he admitted. "Horton Farm is high-performing Green Belt, but without it, the plan will almost certainly be found unsound. If we exclude it, speculative developments could wreak havoc across the borough."

Motions and Proposals: Protecting the Green Belt

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) questioned the land allocated for Gypsy and Traveller sites, suggesting higher densities to reduce the footprint. "If we increase the density from 16.5 to 25 or 30 per hectare, could we not meet the full need on a smaller site?" he

asked. Planning Policy Manager Ian Mawer responded, explaining that the lower density reflects cultural and practical requirements for Gypsy and Traveller communities, including space for caravans, vehicles, and utility blocks.

Cllr **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) called for stronger environmental commitments, particularly around climate change and biodiversity. "Why are climate and biodiversity issues always buried at the end?" she asked. "These should be front and centre of the plan."

Meanwhile, Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) vehemently opposed the inclusion of Horton Farm. "This is not a balanced plan," he declared. "Including Horton Farm doesn't protect other Green Belt sites—it puts them at greater risk. The planning inspector will see this as justification to include more Green Belt land."

Despite these objections, motions to remove Horton Farm and other Green Belt sites were defeated, with officers warning that such changes would undermine the plan's soundness. "Without Horton Farm, we simply cannot meet housing needs or provide Gypsy and Traveller pitches, which are legal requirements," said Ian Mawer.

Difficult Decisions: Reluctant Support for the Plan

As the debate continued, councillors wrestled with the plan's broader implications. Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington), reflecting the prevailing mood, said, "None of us like this plan, but what's the alternative? Without an up-to-date Local Plan, we're at the mercy of speculative developments. We cannot afford to start from scratch."

Cllr Woodbridge echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the risks of delay. "This plan is far from perfect, but it's the best chance we have to protect the majority of our Green Belt while meeting our obligations. If we fail, the consequences could be far worse."

However, not all councillors were resigned to compromise. Cllr Persand insisted that rejecting the plan would force the council to find alternative solutions. "We don't have to accept this bad plan," he argued. "There is still time to come up with something better."

Press Release and Public Reaction

Following the vote, EEBC issued a press release reiterating the importance of adopting the Local Plan. "The Proposed Submission Local Plan strikes the optimal balance between development and preservation," said Cllr O'Donovan. "It will deliver affordable housing, protect biodiversity, and secure infrastructure improvements while safeguarding the majority of the borough's Green Belt."

The press release also emphasized the risks of not adopting a plan, including unplanned and speculative developments. Residents were encouraged to participate in the upcoming Regulation 19 consultation, set to begin in early 2025.

Public reaction, however, remains overwhelmingly critical. Campaigners accused the council of ignoring residents' views and bowing to government pressure. "This is not a balanced plan," said Janice Baker. "It's a capitulation."

Looking Ahead: Full Council Debate

The draft Local Plan now moves to the Full Council for debate on 10th December 2024. With opposition among councillors and residents showing no signs of abating, the future of Epsom's Green Belt hangs in the balance.

While some see the plan as a necessary compromise, others view it as a betrayal of the borough's character and environmental heritage. The upcoming Full Council meeting promises to be as contentious as the LPPC debate, as Epsom grapples with the challenge of balancing growth and preservation.

The real world visits the virtual world at Ewell's NESCOT

Principals and teachers from across the world visited Nescot (North East Surrey College of Technology) College in Ewell, Surrey last week, to try out its brand-new virtual reality (VR) immersive classroom. Delegates from Brazil to Bulgaria and South Africa to Singapore joined a visit arranged by global education network ORT for a masterclass on artificial intelligence (AI), chatbots, and the use of immersive technology in education.

The Nescot immersive classroom is packed with state-of-the-art technology, including an Igloo (a pod with a 360-degree projection system), immersive room, vehicle simulators, and VR headsets. The international delegates were able to try these out and found themselves virtually transported to different spaces, driving diggers on a construction site, and exploring hazards in a health and safety simulation. Students from across the curriculum at the college use the room to gain skills and experiences they couldn't easily access elsewhere.

The visit to Nescot was part of ORT's Hatter technology seminar programme, where professional educators from around the world explore the latest developments in science, technology, engineering, and maths teaching and learning.

Somayyeh Clifton, Head of Quality Improvement & Innovation at Nescot, who led the masterclass, said: "It's been so fantastic to welcome delegates from across the globe to Nescot to share ideas, experience, and knowledge on AI. It's also been brilliant to give them a demo of our incredible equipment, which makes learning exciting, interactive, and fun. Working with other education professionals like this is so valuable, with different perspectives helping to inspire our work going forward. We're all working to give students the best education, which will lead to fulfilling careers in the modern world. Our excellent facilities at Nescot have been a game changer."

Leor Harel, World ORT Learning Development Manager, said: "Nescot's VR classrooms are a groundbreaking approach to education and immersive technology. This visit was a perfect opportunity for our group of global education experts to see first-hand a world-leading provision. We are delighted that our teachers will go back to their schools and apply the principles and learnings from their time at Nescot."

Nescot is a hub of innovation, with the Sussex and Surrey Institute of Technology hosting robotics, AI, and cyber security facilities. The college is part of the AI in Education initiative, with Principal and CEO Julie Kapsalis sitting on the Strategic Board. AI in Education aims to support and advise schools and colleges so they can maximise the benefits of AI and minimise the risks.

The funding to create the immersive space was provided from the Government's Local Skills Improvement Fund, a project which aims to support local people into work. As well as being beneficial for education professionals and Nescot students, the college is encouraging local businesses to get involved by using the technology to train staff. Partnerships with business and enterprise are invaluable for both parties, as organisations get to access cutting-edge training and learning resources, plus a pool of talented, experienced students who can enter the workforce via apprenticeships, work placements, and post-college recruitment.

Nescot offers college courses for school leavers and adults, with a wide range of career-focused vocational courses including Animal Care, Business, Computing and IT, Construction, Performing Arts, Childcare, Health & Social Care, and Beauty Therapy.

To find out more, call 020 8394 3038, visit www.nescot.ac.uk or email adviceteam@nescot.ac.uk.

Local businesses interested in using the immersive classroom for training, or working with the college on apprenticeships, work placements, or recruitment should contact businesscentre@nescot.ac.uk or call 020 8394 8593.

Sorry Surrey Borough for "shameful" past

Woking Borough Council has apologised for the "shameful" behaviour of its past.

The bankrupt council met last night to hear from the authors of the long-awaited review into how the authority went bust.

The council saddled itself with debts of about £2billion - borrowed to fund failed investments and regeneration that has left residents facing years of huge tax hikes and cuts to services.

The Grant Thornton Report found 'potentially unlawful' lending, failures of leadership, borrowing to lend to third parties, a £3m

"opportunities fund" overseen by the former chief executive Ray Morgan, potential scope for conflicts of interest, and poor decision making such as borrowing £700m to buy an asset now worth approximately £205m.

The council held the extraordinary meeting to consider the report's findings where, as expected, it accepted the findings and recommendations in full.

Surrey Police has been contacted by the borough's chief executive to make clear that any evidence of criminality or misfeasance in public office will be referred to them for investigation.

Although it is unclear, given the state of record keeping during the period in question, what the outcomes of this may be, the meeting heard.

A separate legal challenge pursued through the courts could be explored, but would require new instructions from the council.

Not on the original papers, but added during the debate, was the formal apology.

Cllr Leslie Rice (Liberal Democrats; Heathlands) said: "Humility does not belong to the political class generally.

A humble politician is an oxymoron or a paradox I'm not sure which. But I think in this situation...we should be showing collective humility this evening as Woking Borough Council.

"While we are different members of the council, the council itself is responsible for these legacy problems, these historical problems.

"We should apologise to the people of Woking. The situation we have is shameful.

"It's shameful (too) on our government, our historic governments going way back, that we completely lack proper regulation and oversight of the local government sector.

"We should apologise to the people of Woking."

The two and a half hour meeting began with leader of the opposition Cllr Amanda Boote (Independent; Byfleet and West Byfleet) paying tribute to former member John Bond, a long-standing critic of the council's financial handling, but who died earlier this year.

Her words were echoed by many of those who spoke.

Addressing the council, she called the report cathartic, shocking and sad "especially for all of the residents of Woking who we have collectively let down.

She said: "Residents will continue to feel the impact of this for many many years to come.

"I think the most important thing is we have to learn lessons now, hard lessons so that history can never repeat itself."

She added: "I want to pay tribute to my predecessor and founder of our independent group the late councillor John Bond.

"Since first becoming a councillor in 2014 and until he retired in 2021 Cllr Bond fought constantly to highlight the wrongdoings of the previous corporate management group and of the previous administration.

"Highlighting the wholly inadequate governance, poor investment decisions, poor accounting lack of transparency.

"And it's sad that he was belittled and laughed at. He even resorted to writing many newspaper articles to try to get his voice heard.

"This is not about political point scoring but I couldn't let tonight go by without paying tribute to Councillor Bond and all of his hard work and scrutiny in trying to stop this disaster from ever happening."

In a statement released after the meeting, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, leader of Woking Borough Council, said that the Grant Thornton public interest report confirmed what many residents already felt; that their council had let them down.

She said: "Years of mismanagement, poor governance and a disregard for the risks have left our community burdened with unsustainable debt. These systemic failings betrayed the trust residents placed in the council and have had far-reaching consequences.

"On behalf of Woking Borough Council I want to apologise for these unacceptable failings of the past.

She added: "By implementing the auditor's recommendations, we are taking decisive action to secure a better future for Woking and the residents we serve."

Epsom and Ewell Times annual neutrality audit

Epsom and Ewell Times Neutrality Council Annual Report.

The unedited and full responses from members of the Neutrality Council together with our response can be read HERE

Introduction: The Epsom and Ewell Times (EET) established the Neutrality Council to provide an independent assessment of its political neutrality. The council consists of representatives from the main political affiliations. The following sections summarise the contributions of each member.

Contribution from Robert Leach - Residents Association

- 1. Overall neutrality rating: 10/10.
- 2. Fair representation of political viewpoints: Yes.
- 3. Instances of bias: None noted.
- 4. Fair representation of Residents' Associations: Yes.
- 5. Handling of controversial issues: "Well."
- 6. Reporting quality: Moderate, with a noted lack of council item coverage and human interest stories.
- 7. Separation of opinion and news: Yes.
- 8. Coverage of local community issues: Fair, with potential for increased diversity.
- 9. Suggestions: Expand reporting to include information from other organizations and businesses.

Response from EET: We thank Robert for his detailed feedback and positive remarks regarding neutrality and representation. We aim to address the need for more council coverage, human interest stories, and broader engagement with local organizations.

Contribution from Alison Kelly - Liberal Democrats

- 1. Neutrality rating: 9/10.
- 2. Fair representation of political viewpoints: Yes, with occasional gaps due to lack of comments from opposition.
- 3. Bias instances: None significant but noted balance could improve in regional coverage.
- 4. Handling of controversial issues: Factual and balanced.
- 5. Reporting quality: High, with engaging content like "Opinion Polls" and "The Strange Maths."
- 6. Community engagement: Effective, with suggestions to include faith groups and increase coverage in the North Borough.
- 7. Suggestions: Extend coverage to faith organizations like the Hook Road Islamic Centre.

Response from EET: We appreciate Alison's thoughtful analysis and actionable suggestions, particularly regarding faith groups and geographic coverage. These insights are invaluable as we expand our community engagement efforts.

Contribution from Mark Todd - Labour

- 1. Neutrality rating: 9/10.
- 2. Fair representation: Yes, with balanced representation of political viewpoints.
- 3. Instances of bias: None observed.
- 4. Coverage of controversial issues: Well-handled.
- 5. Reporting quality: Exceptional, especially on elections and green belt issues.
- 6. Community engagement: Effective and inclusive.
- 7. Suggestions: None; praised as an "amazing community newspaper."

Response from EET: Mark's praise for our coverage of elections and green belt issues is encouraging. We remain committed to delivering high-quality reporting on critical community matters.

Contribution from Emma Ware - Conservative

Emma expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived bias toward the Liberal Democrats and anti-green belt campaigners. She cited specific articles as examples of bias:

- 1. "Belted up on Green Belt" (15 January 2024): Allegedly one-sided with minimal counterarguments.
- 2. "Democracy at Work or Strange Mathematics" (July 2024): Criticized for unsupported assertions.
- 3. "Surrey Lib Dems Majority Tale on Thames Water" (July 2023): Lacked context, appeared biased.
- 4. "Local MP Comes to Our Defence" (September 2024): Claimed biased language.
- 5. "Epsom Pensioners Gather Less Winter Fuel Pay" (30 September 2024): Inappropriate imagery and unsubstantiated quotes.
- 6. "Surrey Schools Kids Country Walk" (November 2024): Pejorative language. [Ed: This was a BBC report.]
- 7. "Epsom Town as a Safe Place to Live": Exaggerated comparisons and unsupported assertions.

Response from EET: We regret Emma's dissatisfaction and take her concerns seriously. While our intention is always to provide balanced reporting, we acknowledge where improvements can be made, such as ensuring better context and avoiding inappropriate imagery. We remain open to constructive input and encourage diverse contributions from all community members.

Conclusion: The Neutrality Council has provided a diverse range of insights into the performance of the Epsom and Ewell Times over the past year. While the majority view reflects favourably on our efforts, we recognise that there is always room for growth. We thank each member for their time, dedication, and honest assessments.

As always, we welcome further feedback from our readers and the wider community. Transparency and accountability remain at the heart of everything we do.

The unedited and full responses from members of the Neutrality Council can be read HERE

Annual Epsom and Ewell Times neutrality audit

Here we reprint the contributions of the four members of the Epsom and Ewell Times Neutrality Council in full.

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES Neutrality Council

Epsom and Ewell Times admin@epsomandewelltimes.com 12 October 2024 at 01:22

To: Robert Leach (Residents Association), Emma Ware (Conservative), Mark Todd (Labour), Alison Kelly (Liberal Democrat)

Dear Member of the Epsom and Ewell Times "Neutrality Council",

By way of reminder, here is the link to our public announcement on the creation of the Council.

Below is a set of questions that may assist in guiding your appraisal. It is not mandatory, but if followed, there will be a consistency of approach that may make easier reading for the public.

We ask you to bear in mind during your appraisal that we are all unpaid volunteers, save for the contributions from the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service (Emily Dalton, Emily Coady-Stemp, and Chris Caulfield). Also, we ask you to bear in mind that persons and parties in power can expect greater scrutiny than those who are not.

We ask you to complete your appraisals by the end of this month of October with a view to publication in November.

Thank you very much indeed.

Epsom and Ewell Times

Robert Leach - Residents Association

14 October 2024 at 16:03

- 1. Overall neutrality rating: 10/10.
- 2. Fair representation of political viewpoints: Yes.
- 3. Instances of bias: No.
- 4. Fair representation of Residents' Associations: Yes.
- 5. Handling of controversial issues: Well.
- 6. Reporting quality: Moderate. Many council items are not covered, and there is little human interest or coverage of other EE events.
- 7. Separation of opinion and news: Yes.
- 8. Coverage of local community issues: Fair. See comments for 6.
- 9. Suggestions: The paper is very good and fair. I believe there is much more that could be reported. Perhaps other organisations and businesses could be encouraged to provide info.
- 10. Additional comments: Although not asked, I believe I have been fairly reported as a councillor.

Kind regards, Robert Leach

Alison Kelly - Liberal Democrat

16 October 2024 at 14:41

- 1. Overall neutrality rating: 9/10.
- 2. Fair representation of political viewpoints: Clearly attributes quotes in reports on council meetings and tries to include a view from each party. Most instances where there is no opposition opinion, it was because they made no comment.
- 3. Instances of bias: None stood out. Some felt less mention of Lib Dem comments in areas like Mole Valley could

improve balance.

- 4. Fair representation of Residents' Associations: As the ruling group, they seem to get a good hearing.
- 5. Handling of controversial issues: You reach out for opinions and tend to remain factual rather than showing political bias.
- 6. Reporting quality: Editorial content is limited but strong. Liked "Opinion Polls" and "The Strange Maths."
- 7. Separation of opinion and news: None that caused concerns.
- 8. Coverage of community issues: Effective and relevant, though less coverage seen in the North Borough.
- 9. Suggestions: Consider including more on faith groups and their activities. The Hook Road Islamic Centre revamp could be an interesting feature.
- 10. Additional comments: Generally find the paper useful, interesting, and balanced.

Mark Todd - Labour

9 November 2024 at 16:27

- 1. Overall neutrality rating: 9/10.
- 2. Fair representation of political viewpoints: Yes. I think everyone has been fairly represented.
- 3. Instances of bias: None observed.
- 4. Fair representation of Residents' Associations: Yes.
- 5. Handling of controversial issues: Well done.
- 6. Reporting quality: Exceptional, particularly on elections and green belt issues. Hustings coverage was a triumph.
- 7. Separation of opinion and news: Yes.
- 8. Coverage of community issues: Adequate and diverse.
- 9. Suggestions: No suggestions. Congratulations on an amazing community newspaper.

Emma Ware - Conservative

20 November 2024 at 16:11

It is with a heavy heart that I have to admit I have stopped reading the Epsom & Ewell Times, so I don't feel able to answer your detailed questions. I stopped shortly after the election because, in my opinion, it has become a mouthpiece for the Liberal Democrats and to a lesser extent, the anti-green belt campaigners.

Here are seven examples of clear bias in favour of the Lib Dems and unsupported political opinions masquerading as facts:

- 1. "Belted up on Green Belt" (15 January 2024): Felt one-sided with limited counterarguments and no context for affordable housing shortages.
- 2. "Democracy at Work or Strange Mathematics" (July 2024): Contained unsupported assertions and lacked global economic context.
- 3. "Surrey Lib Dems Majority Tale on Thames Water" (July 2023): Used pejorative language with no explanation of long-term trends.
- 4. "Local MP Comes to Our Defence" (September 2024): Headline and article tone were biased.
- 5. "Epsom Pensioners Gather Less Winter Fuel Pay" (30 September 2024): The image was inappropriate, and the claims

were unsubstantiated.

- 6. "Surrey School Kids Country Walk" (November 2024): Descriptions of the Conservative-controlled County Council were overly pejorative. [Ed: This was a BBC report.]
- 7. "Epsom Town as a Safe Place to Live": Over-the-top comparisons and unsupported assertions.

Thanks, Emma Ware

Editor to Emma Ware

Thank you very much.

I appreciate all the comments you make and just want to be certain that you are content for them to be published in full?

It is proving to be challenging to sustain a perfectly balanced micro-sized local news service that seeks to serve the public interest in holding civic powers to account. The previous news services in Epsom and Ewell died over 20 years ago due to the cost of print and journalists. Epsom and Ewell Times joins a growing number of "indies" up and down the country that rely on the volunteer "citizen contributor" model.

"For the community, by the community" effectively means our content reflects the community's input. There maybe the appearance of imbalance arising from the choice or time constraints of other voices. We constantly appeal for more contributors.

The point I am making is that anyone with a criticism or disagreement with any of our published content is always welcome to contribute and within reason will be published. Equally other voices can initiate content.

I am a little surprised you should accuse EET of being a LibDem "mouthpiece" following our very fair and balanced coverage of the General Election candidates.

When Chris was MP we never criticised him and published a number of "Westminster Views" penned by him. Now we have a new and first ever female MP, she was surely entitled to a little honeymoon? And that is over as shown by our publication of a critical letter on her position on the location of a new hospital.

I am not inviting you to re-think but I have to say I think your criticisms are somewhat selective and overall very harsh and they are not shared by the others, including the RA.

Kind regards, Epsom and Ewell Times

Epsom and Ewell Times adds we have published numerous press releases from Conservative run Surrey County Council extolling its achievements with extensive quotes from Conservative Councillors. We have also frequently quoted Epsom and Ewell's two Conservative Borough Councillors, Bernie Muir and Kieran Persand and hinted at no criticism of their efforts and service.

We hope Emma Ware's reaction post 4th July will not deter a new Conservative undertaking the role of membership of our Neutrality Council.

Music of mass creation in Epsom

Two mass settings in the same concert - too much of the same thing or the starting point for a creative programme of music?

During his time as music director of **Epsom Chamber Choir**, **Jack Apperley** has demonstrated a flair for devising intriguing programmes, whose themes emerge as you listen and learn about the music, revealing fascinating links that stitch the pieces together in interesting and often surprising ways.

In Saturday evening's concert at St Martin's Church in Epsom, we were invited to compare and contrast the mass settings of two composers, **Stravinsky** and **Bruckner** - the same liturgical texts but different musical language; the same instrumental forces

but different ways of using timbres of woodwind and brass to accompany the choral textures. More on these pieces later but, linking them to the present, Peter Burton, a member of Epsom Chamber Choir, deliberately used the same forces in his setting of words from Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God", which opened the concert. Peter captured the essence of the Psalmists' words in music which expressed awe and wonder through a series of luminous chords before growing to a soaring climax.

The influence of Mozart then emerged as one of the programme's themes in the next piece, Jonathan Dove's Movements from Figures in the Garden. Commissioned by Glyndebourne for their 1991 Mozart bicentenary celebrations, this wind serenade was designed to be played outdoors before a performance of The Marriage of Figaro. Each movement subtly weaves snippets of arias, recitatives and musical phrases from the opera into more abstract musical textures, causing a ripple of amusement at moments of recognition amongst both the players (Chameleon Arts Wind Ensemble) and audience.

We then learned from Jack's introduction that Stravinsky had spent much time listening to Mozart's Missa Brevis during the period 1944 – 1948, when he was writing his mass setting. It is not easy to tell what effect this may have had on him but we can certainly hear the influence of Stravinsky's Russian Orthodox faith in the syllabic setting of much of the text, especially in the Credo. The choir's excellent clear diction made this particularly effective. The final a cappella 'Amen', sung with great beauty and stillness, brought a peaceful sense of calm to the close of the first half of the concert.

The second half took us from Stravinsky's rather austere neo-classical style to the more lush, romantic sound world of Bruckner and the choir embraced this shift with delight. There was a good sense of ensemble and balance between the players and singers and a palpable sensitivity to the text. Particularly beautiful were the close harmony exchanges between a cappella female then male voices in the Qui tollis and Benedictus passages, where intonation and balance between the voices was flawless. Other highlights were the radiant beauty of the Crucifixus and the perfectly executed suspensions at 'miserere' in the Agnus Dei.

Two mass settings framing a varied musical menu and subtly woven themes: this was a creative programme that both challenged and delighted. I'm looking forward to the next one!

Carolyn Boulding

Surrey carers getting digital support

Surrey County Council is rolling out additional support for tens of thousands of unpaid carers living in the county as part of a new digital service.

At least 90,000 people in Surrey provide unpaid care for friends, family members or neighbours. Through the new initiative, these unpaid carers will gain access to a wide range of free on-demand services, aimed at supporting individuals with the day-to-day realities of caring.

The initiative is being delivered by Mobilise – a carer-led digital community – in partnership with Surrey County Council. It will provide a complementary layer of added support that can be accessed remotely via an online hub by anyone caring for a loved one in the county. New digital support services which carers in Surrey are set to gain access to include:

- An online peer community of thousands of fellow carers from across the UK with the chance to share advice and experiences through a community forum and during regular events, such as the 'virtual cuppa'
- Easy-to-use, self-service tools outlining the different forms of support which carers may be entitled to including Carer's Allowance and guidance on how to navigate eligibility criteria and access various benefits, for example
- Tailor-made support guides on everything from how to balance caring with full-time work, to managing personal health and wellbeing while looking after someone else
- Information on carers' rights and relevant social care law, in line with the latest government guidance

An AI-powered 'assistant' is also available to help carers quickly and easily find the specific information, resources or support that they need.

Martin, a carer from Surrey who looks after their partner, said: "I'm delighted to have come across Mobilise. It's great to know that there is a wide community of carers who can, without judgement, share their honest views and experiences on such a wide range of topics. It's reassuring to know that there are like-minded people out there and that we're not alone."

Suzanne Bourne, Co-Founder and Head of Carer Support at Mobilise, commented: "An increasing number of us are taking on caring responsibilities, with one million additional carers set to emerge in the UK over the next ten years. The reality of caring will look different for each of these people – including the 90,000 people who are looking after their loved ones in Surrey.

"For some, it will start with needing to check in with family members more frequently, with caring responsibilities increasing over time. For others, it might be a case of having always needed to support relatives with their medication, self-care, and appointments, or even full-time care. But in each and every case, having the right support is vital.

"That's why we're proud to be partnering with Surrey County Council to deliver additional support for carers living in the county. Through our community of carers – the largest of its kind – carers in Surrey will gain access to a powerful peer support network, as well as round-the-clock advice, resources, and guidance from experts. We're delighted to be able to work to connect carers in Surrey to this added support and to each other."

Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, said: "Carers play a crucial role in families and in our local communities by supporting people who would otherwise struggle to cope alone which is why it's so important for us to make sure carers themselves are cared for.

"We're pleased to be partnering with Mobilise to reach more carers across Surrey and support them in new and different ways. I'd encourage anyone who looks after a family member or friend to visit the Mobilise online community and explore the additional support available."

Vicky Stobbart, Director of Long Term Planning Delivery and Senior Responsible Officer for Carers at Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care Board, added: "This initiative with Mobilise is a wonderful way for carers across Surrey to gain additional, digital support with their day-to-day caring duties. We're delighted that it's being rolled out and look forward to seeing the benefits as our carers start to use it."

For more information about the support now available in Surrey, visit Surrey's Mobilise community. To start accessing support, the Mobilise app can be downloaded via the Apple App Store or Google Play, with more information available on Mobilise's website.

Another solar power story - Leatherhead

A four-year fight to install solar panels in a Leatherhead car park has left those behind the green project both "disappointed and very exited".

Mole Valley District Council declared a climate emergency in 2019 and has been trying to decrease its carbon emissions ever since, with the goal of reaching net zero by 2030.

Now, a pilot scheme set to be approved could to be a step in the right direction - but has left some wishing for a "far more expansive" roll out, after funding was approved to cover just 20 bays in Leatherhead with the new tech, the size of about two tennis courts.

Bays in the centre's car park will have new coverings with solar panelling installed on top. Electricity from the panels will be used to help power Leatherhead Leisure Centre although it will fall well short of delivering its full need.

It is anticipated that the electricity generated annually by the solar panels will be 37,498 kWh or about 2.7 per cent of what the centre uses – although it would still be enough to reduce the council's carbon footprint by about 9.7 tonnes a year.

Hope is not lost for those wishing to see greater role out of the panels as the council has said that, should key milestones and performance targets be hit, "the intention is that further role out of solar carports across other Mole Valley District Council carparks including Pippbrook Offices and Reigate Road will be implemented".

Cabinet Member Councillor Claire Malcomson said: "It's taken four years to get this far.

"I'm disappointed and very excited about this because at long last we're going to be doing it, I would love it to be far more expansive but it is only a pilot therefore hopefully it's going to open some really good doors for us."

The £175,000 project is expected to take about 16 years to cover its costs and the levels of energy produced too low to require battery storage units.

Regardless, the system will be plugged into the national grid with any spare capacity sold into the network - the most likely

scenario here being on days the centre is closed.

She said: "It would take 16 years to pay itself back and I just hope we will consider it as its a very good step in the right direction because other councils are taking over but it was actually Mole Valley that initiated this in the first place."

A similar project is already in place in the Elmbridge Civic Centre car park in Esher.

Cllr Andy Smith (Independent; Ashtead Lanes and Common) said: "This is a very good scheme indeed.

"I share the disappointment that its taken so long to get off the ground but I'm very keen that we seize the opportunities for this type of solar project rather than using up productive agricultural land with solar arrays."

Final sign off on the plans are dependent on cabinet approval.

Leatherhead Leisure Centre (Image Google)

Surrey's focus on independent lives is "good".

Surrey County Council's adult social care services have been rated as 'good' by a health watchdog – despite some inconsistencies. In the local authority's first ever overall rating, the Care Quality Commission found SCC 'good' at keeping people independent for longer in communities.

The new report, published November 20, comes from the CQC's new responsibilities to assess how local authorities meet their duties under the Care Act. The watchdog assessed SCC in nine areas, including how the local authority works with people, safeguarding and leadership.

The CQC's report found one of the county council's strengths was that a "variety of measures were in place to prevent, reduce and delay people's needs". People could access information and advice where needed but improvements could be made to streamline this further.

CQC assessment teams reported 70 per cent of the service's provision should be rated "good". The report did highlight some areas that needed improvement, which the council said it would be working on.

Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, said: "The dedication of our staff shines through the report and I'd like to thank them publicly for their hard work making a positive difference to the lives of thousands of people in communities across Surrey.

"Our ultimate goal is to deliver the best possible services for Surrey residents and this 'good' outcome will help instil confidence in the services and support we are providing and that we are on the right path to making further improvements."

Partners with SCC gave positive feedback about how the authority worked with them to support people's independence, according to the report. Data for Surrey showed 86% of people who have received short term support didn't need ongoing longer-term support which is positive compared to the England and regional average of 78%.

Inspectors praised Surrey for their "ambitious" plans to increase supported living by at least 500 spaces to help encourage people's independence, choice and control. The council is also working to keep people in their homes for longer and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions, reducing pressure on A&E departments.

Good, but inconsistent

However, the CQC found there was room for improvement. Although a lot of the feedback seemed positive in the report, inspectors noted experiences of receiving care and support in Surrey varied.

The report said: "One person was assessed and felt listened to, achieving the outcome they wanted, which was to return to live at home. Other people had similar good experiences with staff focusing on what people wanted plus their future wishes, people described staff as being empathic and showing them respect."

Safeguarding was judged to be effective, slightly above the national average, but has some shortcomings. Staff and partners raised concerns about some new safeguarding processes that were not yet fully embedded with knowledge and understanding of some staff.

Staffing challenges were also flagged as an issue, leading to some reviews not carried out in a timely way and leading to a

backlog. Partners working with SCC told inspectors the cost of living crisis had affected people on low incomes, and Surrey was an expensive place to live, making it hard to recruit and retain staff and then impact on care services, the report said.

But the report noted SCC has long-term plans to address recruitment challenges which had been created with staff. The local authority stated they were making improvements to manage risks until staffing levels had improved, by making better use of existing resources.

James Bullion, CQC's chief inspector of adult social care and integrated care, said the county council "should be proud of this assessment and the foundation they've created on which to build improvements and further innovation".

He added: "The local authority was very aware that although Surrey is an affluent county, there are pockets of deprivation where residents have high levels of need and disadvantage. The authority knew of these very differing needs of its population and were doing some creative work to meet those needs and help people keep their independence."

Commenting on the report's feedback for improvement, Mrs Mooney said: "As we celebrate this achievement, we also recognise that there are areas where we need to learn and develop and we are actively working to address all feedback from the CQC through comprehensive improvement plans. Our new director of adult social services recently started with us, so we're well-placed to build on this result to further raise the bar for our residents."

Photo: Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care (*second from right*), pictured with people who draw and care and support alongside staff from the provider Dramatize, which supports adults with learning disabilities after they leave education, offering a wide range of activities including day provisions and employment and life skills programmes.

A poll on polling - Epsom and Ewell consults

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will launch a six-week consultation into proposed changes to the polling district and polling places within the borough from 21 November 2024 to 2 January 2025.

In 2023, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England carried out a review of Surrey County Council's electoral boundaries. The resulting Surrey (Electoral Changes) Order 2024 is anticipated to be passed by parliament and will make changes to the County Council's electoral division boundaries.

This consultation will propose changes to Court and Horton wards in order to bring the areas in line with their new County Council electoral division and ensure ballots are placed in the correct ballot box.

There are no proposed changes for any other wards, as issues arising from the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May were resolved for the Parliamentary elections in July.

Jackie King, Chief Executive of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council said,

"I would like to encourage all residents in the borough to have their say on the proposals in this consultation. It is important to review our polling district and places now to ensure the council is fully prepared for next year's County Council election and the changes to the electoral divisions."

The consultation can be accessed via the following link: https://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/council/elections-and-voting/electoral-boundaries