EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

19th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

Epic comeback against Sutton & Epsom RFC a fitting end

3 February 2025

Medway 32 Sutton & Epsom RFC 31. Saturday 1st February.

It was an emotional Saturday at Priestfields as the hosts had suffered the tragic passing of their cherished groundsman Mel Collins. The archetypal club stalwart, former player, club sponsor and Vice President passed away whilst marking out the pitch for a midweek Army fixture. Grassroots rugby is far more than promotion and relegation; it is about tradition, camaraderie and lifelong friendships, and it seemed entirely appropriate that Medway won this thrilling and highly entertaining encounter 32-31.

Sutton and Epsom were much changed following their Sidcup success as they endured that modern scourge of club rugby – the overseas stag weekend. Resources were stretched but Jack Butt on the bench was the only new face to the campaign. Following a minute's silence, Medway kicked off, but it was the Black & Whites who had the perfect start, scoring from the opening scrum. Number 10 Tom Lennard's intelligent switch to the blindside created an instant overlap, and winger Matt Symonds finished with ease. The conversion from the flank drifted harmlessly by as Sutton led 5-0.

The Kent team pressed hard for an immediate response, but the S&E defence stood firm through multiple phases. However, this effort came at a cost as prop Callum Gibson's thunderous tackle left him prostrate with a shoulder injury that saw Richard Madadangoma enter the fray rather earlier than he had wished. This setback did not upset the visitors' equilibrium. The Sutton defence again withstood a further assault until the referee awarded the hosts a penalty. The three points were surprisingly squandered. Moments later, Medway had a second chance and this time opted for the kick to the corner and the attacking lineout. Plan B was stymied by conceding a penalty.

Tom Lennard turned defence into attack with a massive clearance that left the Priestfield men deep in their 22. The Black & Whites again opted to give it swiftly to their backs. Adam Bibby made the break, and his sublime pass to his centre partner Josh Rea saw him score near the uprights. Tom Lennard added the extras for 12-0 at the end of the first quarter.

From the restart, Tom Lennard again illustrated his prowess with the boot as he sent the home defence scurrying back to their 22. From a scrum, Sutton faked the blindside attack and went open but were thwarted in the corner, needing an excellent tackle from Adam Bibby to stop a promising counter.

On the half-hour mark, it was Medway who again looked to be in the ascendancy as their pack relentlessly carried and their excellent backs kept the ball alive as they probed for weaknesses in the Rugby Lane men's defence. The situation was transformed by a superb turnover from Jac Davies. Steve Munford's awareness led to a kick over the top, and the chase was on. The bounce initially favoured Medway as the ball went backwards and evaded the first attacker, but it nestled obligingly in Tom Lennard's hands. The fly-half set off on a magical jinking run that took him to within a yard. The quality of his pass was diabolical in comparison to his footwork, as the supporting 6-foot-7-inch Ewan McTaggart was offered the ball six inches off the turf. Credit to the lock who gathered the ball and scored. Tom Lennard converted, and Sutton led 19-0.

The crowd hardly had time to digest the score before the Black & Whites added a fourth bonus point try. From the restart, another telling territorial kick put the visitors on the front foot. Flanker Dan Jones made a surging break, and Sutton attacked the left-hand corner. An inspired Tom Lennard summoned his inner Antoine Dupont and lofted an inch-perfect cross-field kick that just cleared the defender and landed in the hands of a grateful Finlay Scott, who touched down. The Sutton 10, who was enjoying his finest display of the season, added the touchline conversion.

The 26-0 score was hardly a fair reflection on the balance of play in the first half, but Sutton had been brilliant in attack. With the clock running down, Medway went in search of a morale-boosting score before the break. On this occasion, S&E failed to cope with the restart, and the Priestfields crowd were rewarded with the first try from their men. Once again, the home forwards carried with passion and precision against the stubborn defence, but this time the hosts would not be denied. Hooker Jack Nickalls was on hand to score out wide. Jamie Ford's kick from the flank unluckily came back off the upright, and the hosts trailed 5-26.

Inspired by opening their account, they stormed back into the Sutton 22 looking to reduce the deficit further, but they were thwarted by another superb Jac Davies turnover. A wonderful first half ended with Sutton & Epsom 26-5 ahead.

From the outset of the second period, Medway ratcheted up the pressure by several notches. Within five minutes, Anthony Clement's blistering break looked certain to create a try, but he was trumped by a Steve Munford cover tackle in the corner. But the hosts were not to be denied, and John Sipawa forced his way over. Jamie Ford did the necessary, and the home team trailed by 12-26.

Soon the fullback was adding three more points to his tally, and the Sutton lead was 26-15. The sizeable Priestfields crowd sensed the game had turned in their favour and urged their team ever onwards. They were rewarded when scrum-half Noah Hyde ended a most profitable third quarter with his side's third try after John Sipawa was hauled down just short of glory. With the extras banked, the deficit was down to four points at 22-26.

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ISSN 2753-2771

With 22 unanswered points, the last thing the visitors needed was another injury, and to make matters worse, it was prop Dan Johnson who departed with a deep cut on his forehead. There was no easing up from the hosts, and their back play got better with every passing moment as players coming from deep with pace were put into gaps with precisely timed passes.

S&E defended valiantly, with Adam Bibby tackling himself to a standstill in midfield. Medway were awarded a kickable penalty but opted for the scrummage. Under severe pressure, the Sutton set-piece was creaking, and the home team had a free ball. Jamie Ford timed his entry into the line to perfection and glided in for the try. Though the 15 hooked his conversion attempt, the comeback was complete as Medway led 27-26.

A few minutes later, a now rampant Medway had their fifth try, and it was the forwards' turn to demonstrate their handling skills as flanker Dan Jackson triumphantly crossed the whitewash. With under ten minutes to go, the hosts led 32-26 and looked to be favourites to stretch their lead.

The Kent team had monopolised possession in the second half to such an extent that many Sutton players might have forgotten what the ball looked like, let alone felt like. The travelling supporters were probably looking at damage limitation and holding on to the losing bonus point. Then the game offered another twist as Gareth O'Brien set off on one of his familiar sidestepping runs. Winger Finlay Scott, who had been starved of possession, devoured the ball and squeezed home in the corner for his second try. The challenging conversion was missed, and Sutton trailed 31-32.

Medway were not to be denied their epic comeback on this most special afternoon. The hosts returned to the offensive, and following another penalty, they were once more on the S&E line. Courageous defence denied the hosts, who were held up over the line. Sutton and Epsom had the drop-out behind their line and had the length of the pitch to cover if they wanted the win. On this occasion, there was to be no last-play drama, and Medway held on for a 32-31 win.

Sutton & Epsom Team:
O'Brien, Symonds, Rea, Bibby, Scott, Lennard, Munford ©, Johnson, Lennie, Gibson, Tame, McTaggart, Jones, Davies & Hegarty. Replacements: Hilton, Gibson & Howes.

Medway Team:
Ford, Chalmers, Bullock, Revell, Sipawa, Clement, Hyde N, Oyesola, Nickalls, Campbell, Cole, Stubbington, Jackson, Hyde J & Ajuzie. Replacements: Perry, Mason & Price.

Online Fraud in Epsom & Ewell: Call for an Online Crime Agency

3 February 2025



Online fraud, particularly through fake retail websites, has become a significant issue both nationally and within our local community of Epsom & Ewell. Recent data underscores the pressing need for enhanced measures to protect consumers from these deceptive practices.

The Local Impact

In the 2023/24 financial year, Surrey reported 1,276 cases of online shopping fraud, resulting in losses totaling £848,000.his equates to an average loss of approximately £665 per victim. These figures highlight the substantial financial impact on residents and the pervasive nature of online fraud in our area.

National Perspective

Across the UK, online shopping scams are alarmingly prevalent.n the year leading up to October 2023, there were 71,894 reports of such scams, with total reported losses amounting to £106.8 million.he average loss per victim was £1,486, indicating that the financial repercussions can be devastating.

Current Policing Resources

The primary body for reporting fraud in the UK is Action Fraud, the national reporting center for fraud and cybercrime. Reports submitted to Action Fraud are analyzed by the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB), which then disseminates information to relevant police forces for investigation. However, the increasing volume and sophistication of online fraud cases have strained existing resources, leading to calls for more specialized approaches.

The Proposal for an Online Crime Agency

Helen Maguire, Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, is advocating for the establishment of a dedicated Online Crime Agency. This agency would focus exclusively on combating online fraud and related cyber crimes. The proposed agency aims to:

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ISSN 2753-2771

- **Specialized Focus**: oncentrate resources and expertise specifically on online fraud, ensuring more effective prevention and enforcement.
- **Enhanced Coordination**: acilitate better collaboration between various law enforcement bodies, technology companies, and financial institutions to address the multifaceted nature of online scams.
- **Victim Support**: rovide dedicated support to victims of online fraud, guiding them through reporting processes and helping them recover losses where possible. P Maguire emphasizes the urgency of this initiative, stating, "Victims in Surrey have been left short-changed and vulnerable to opportunistic fraudsters. We urgently need action. The previous Conservative government completely failed to act. They were asleep at the wheel when it came to online fraud."

Maguire argues the establishment of a specialized Online Crime Agency could play a pivotal role in safeguarding consumers. By focusing dedicated resources and fostering collaboration across sectors, such an agency holds the promise of mitigating the impact of online fraud on our community.

Epsom & Ewell households drowning as water bills rise?

3 February 2025



Epsom & Ewell Residents Face Sharp Water Bill Hike as Regional Disparities Emerge

From April 2025, households in Epsom & Ewell will see a substantial increase in water bills, with Thames Water implementing a 31% rise. This means an additional £151 annually per household, increasing the average bill from £488 to £639. The rise places Thames Water among the highest increases across England, sparking significant concern among local residents and political representatives. Thames Water provides water and waste water services.

Local MP Slams Government's Inaction

Helen Maguire, the Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, has criticised the government's failure to regulate water companies more effectively. In a statement, she said:

> *"This is an outrageous bill rise. Instead of tackling Thames Water or taking them to task, the Government has given them free reign – and residents in Epsom & Ewell are paying the price. It's a disgrace that water companies have been able to hike our bills – a third of which goes on servicing debt – while they fail to fix leaks and pollute our rivers and streams like the River Mole and the Hogsmill."*

Maguire and the Liberal Democrats have urged the government to introduce a single social tariff to support vulnerable customers struggling to meet rising water costs.

Neighbouring Areas See Water Bill Decrease

In stark contrast, Sutton and East Surrey Water (SES Water), which serves areas including east Surrey, West Sussex, west Kent, and parts of south London, will reduce water bills by 2%, bringing the average bill down from £254 to £249. The decrease raises questions about why some suppliers are able to manage costs effectively while others, like Thames Water, continue to impose steep increases.

SES Water has not provided a detailed explanation for the reduction, but such adjustments typically stem from operational efficiencies, regulatory decisions, or improved cost management. SES provides water only services.

Where Thames Water Stands in the Rankings

According to a national comparison of 22 water companies, Thames Water ranks 5th in terms of the highest increase, making it one of the worst affected companies for bill hikes. The highest increase recorded is from Southern Water, while Sutton and East Surrey Water sits at the bottom of the list with the only decrease.

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Continued Concerns Over Water Pollution

The significant bill increase for Thames Water customers comes amid growing concerns about water pollution in the region. In 2024, the River Mole suffered over 2,000 additional hours of pollution compared to 2023, worsening environmental and public health risks. Critics argue that rather than prioritising investment in infrastructure improvements, Thames Water's rising bills are being used to manage corporate debt and executive pay.

Thames Water on the Brink of Collapse

The sharp rise in Thames Water bills comes as the company teeters on the edge of financial collapse. The UK's largest water supplier, responsible for 15 million customers, has been struggling under a £15 billion debt burden and recently warned it could run out of money by May 2025. In an attempt to stabilise its finances, Thames Water had sought approval from the regulator, Ofwat, to impose a 59% bill increase over the next five years, far exceeding the 31% increase ultimately permitted this coming year. Meanwhile, the government has ruled out a public takeover of the company, despite growing concerns that a full-scale collapse could lead to severe service disruptions. The situation has reignited calls for tighter regulation of the water industry, with critics arguing that customers should not be forced to foot the bill for corporate mismanagement

What Can Residents Do?

With these price hikes looming, residents are encouraged to explore available financial assistance options. Social tariffs, designed for low-income households, may offer some relief, though the inconsistency in eligibility criteria across different water providers remains a pressing issue.

Social tariffs are discounted water rates designed to assist low-income households in managing their water bills. Thames Water offers a social tariff program called **WaterHelp**. This scheme provides up to a 50% discount on annual water bills for eligible customers. Eligibility is determined by comparing the customer's water bill to their net household income and considering the number of occupants in the property. If the water bill exceeds 5% of the household's net income, the customer may qualify for the discount.

Additionally, Thames Water participates in the **WaterSure** programme, which caps bills for metered customers who meet specific criteria. To qualify, customers must receive means-tested benefits and either have a medical condition requiring increased water use or have three or more children under 19 living at home. For the 2024/25 period, the bill is capped at £471, ensuring that eligible customers do not pay more than this amount, regardless of actual water consumption.

These programmes aim to make water services more affordable for vulnerable customers, especially in light of rising water bills. Residents are encouraged to contact Thames Water directly or visit their website to assess eligibility and apply for these support schemes.

Local campaigners continue to push for greater accountability from water companies and regulatory bodies. The debate over water affordability, pollution control, and corporate responsibility is likely to remain a key issue for Epsom & Ewell residents as the April 2025 changes approach.

Related reports:

Surrey's LibDem MP majority take on Thames Water

Thames Water's reputation going down the drain

Thames Water left human waste to fester

Thames Water rebate

Epsom and Ewell FC strike back for draw

3 February 2025

Sheerwater 2-2 Epsom and Ewell. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Saturday 1st February.

Two second half goals enabled us to earn a 2-2 draw and break a five game losing sequence to Sheerwater. For those who love a stat, it also ensured that we remained unbeaten away from home on this day since 1969! A poor first thirty minutes had allowed our opponents to build a deserved two goal lead at the Eastwood Leisure Centre, but we kept plugging away and a change in formation helped us fight back in a match where all four goals were in the same net!

Defensively we remained unchanged from our attritional 1-0 win over Spelthorne Sports eleven days previously, although we made three changes further forward with Craig Dundas coming in for Conrad Essilfie-Conduah. Further forward, Carl Oblitey came in for Will Kendall and Ali Fofahan returned at the expense of Ethan Nelson-Roberts, although the both on the bench and would come on to good effect later in the match.

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We would have been pleased to see that the match was on the artificial surface at Sheerwater after encountering that bumpy surface at the KGF, but found ourselves a goal down in just the seventh minute when a foul in midfield resulted in the ball being delivered into our danger area from where we didn't clear the danger and Elliott York saw his first shot blocked back to him, before guiding the ball around Kevin Kardel and into the far corner from around 15 yards out. Kardel made an excellent block from Byron Mitchell to keep the score down to 1-0 soon after this, but we conceded another in the 16th minute when a low delivery from the left was forced in at the second attempt by Kareem Foster. It almost got worse and we required a brave headed intervention from Anthony Nazareth just as it looked we might concede a third goal. I was already beginning to think of what my report headline might be at this stage, certain that it would be including the word "limp" within it! It truly was an awful start against a team that we had a terrible recent record against.

We were looking unable to find our front men, while our hosts looked like they could score at any time, but around the half hour mark the balance of play began to change and chances began to be created. Nathan Best sliced one shot horribly wide, while Oblitey made a good run, only to see his shot blocked. Still it looked like we were going to struggle to actually find the net and this was summed up by a free kick from over thirty yards from Fofahan, that could best be described as ambitious and resulted in an easy catch for their keeper Fabio Suarez, although he did need to make a couple of good punches to clear some dangerous balls into his six yard area just moments before the break.

"Two-nil is a funny scoreline" Suarez said to us at the break, and I always wonder about comments like that, almost as if they are subconsciously thinking that they were going to be less adventurous and try to stick with what they had. Indeed Suarez had already produced a couple of "Pickford flops" towards the end of the opening forty-five minutes. This is always a dangerous tactic at this level as I think it actually inspires the opposition and the second half would be largely in our favour as the fightback started.

We also made a substitution at the break with Nicolas Bostan coming off and being replaced by Callum Wilson. It's not clear whether this was injury related or tactical, but we also changed our shape at the break and went with three at the back, giving us the opportunity to put more players forward; definitely a gamble worth trying after that opening period. Sheerwater appeared to struggle with this and we nearly got a goal back in the 49th minute when Nazareth's ball into the channel looked like it was going through to Suarez, but as the keeper came out to collect the ball, a defender stuck out a leg and diverted the ball to Luke Miller, only to see his ball across goal just evade the incoming Fofahan with Suarez stranded in no man's land.

Best then sent in a good delivery, but Oblitey couldn't get the header on target. It would be Best's final contribution as he was replaced by Nelson-Roberts. Within two minutes and with the clock ticking on to the hour mark we pulled a goal back. It was a strange one really as Fofahan's corner floated over Suarez and although a defender cleared the ball away with a smart volley, the Assistant was absolutely certain that the ball had crossed the line. I'll be honest, I wasn't convinced, but despite being just two yards from the ball, my angle obviously wasn't as good (or as important!) as the man in black and the goal was awarded. Having now seen the video, it looks like I may have been the one who was correct here! The home side were understandably annoyed about this, with some seeming to claim the ball hadn't crossed the line, while others were claiming that Suarez was fouled. There was certainly some contact on him, but I think the officials got it right and we were back in it. In fact, you could argue that this was the turning point in the match.

However, it was the least we deserved. We had been doing the bulk of the work for a while now and kept pushing for an equaliser against a by now subdued looking Sheerwater team. Miller sent in a good ball from the right wing that was just ahead of Oblitey and Nelson-Roberts sent his header over the bar from a very wide angle, so it would be hard on our substitute to class this as a good opportunity. Our opponents sent a volley from a long throw into our side netting but their threat was becoming less and we sent Kendall on for Fofahan in the 76th minute as we tried to salvage something from this match. And four minutes later it came when Miller's deep corner was headed back across goal by the recently introduced Kendall, where Wilson headed the ball goalwards and Dundas applied the finishing touch from less than a yard to get it over the line. This was a crucial intervention from our experienced midfielder as Wilson's header on its own would have been cleared by the defenders on the line, so you could class this as a typical poacher's finish.

Strangely enough, after being extremely quiet for the bulk of the second half, Sheerwater suddenly woke up. Kardel made a flying save for a corner and Wilson needed to head a shot away from the goal line. We still made chances of our own though, and at the other end Miller volleyed the ball at goal; while Suarez just reached it, he was a little slow getting down to it and only managed to palm the ball up into the air where Oblitey was just able to climb high enough to nod the ball over the line, but the celebrations were short lived as the flag was immediately raised for offside. Then in the closing minutes a Miller corner was sent wide by an unmarked Oblitey who will have been disappointed to miss the target by so much from the position he was in, but if you had told me after half an hour that we'd get anything from this game, I'd have laughed, as we were very much second best at that stage. This was an excellent point at the end of the day.

The draw also pushed us up a spot to sixteenth, while Sheerwater dropped a place to thirteenth, but the point did neither of us any harm in the grand scheme of things as we pulled further away from the bottom two. We now have a cup match in midweek before the final landlord v tenant derby against Corinthian-Casuals coming up on Saturday.

Epsom & Ewell: Kevin Kardel, Niall Stillwell, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Nicolas Bostan, Anthony Nazareth, Luke Miller, Craig Dundas, Carl Oblitey, Ali Fofahan, Nathan Best

Subs: Callum Wilson for Bostan (HT), Ethan Nelson-Roberts for Best (58), Will Kendall for Fofahan (76)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

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19th November 2026
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What might local government reorganisation mean for Epsom and Ewell?

3 February 2025

As Surrey faces a significant overhaul of its local government structure, residents of Epsom and Ewell are rightfully concerned about the potential financial repercussions. The proposed reorganisation may lead to two unitary authorities that merge the county's 11 borough and district councils, a move intended to streamline services and reduce administrative costs. However, this consolidation raises pressing questions about fiscal responsibility and the equitable distribution of debt, particularly for boroughs like Epsom and Ewell that have historically maintained prudent financial practices.

The Financial Landscape of Surrey's Boroughs

The Epsom and Ewell Times has just published three reports detailing the financial woes of three councils within Surrey that are grappling with substantial debts resulting from ambitious investment strategies.

- **Woking Borough Council** declared effective bankruptcy in 2023, burdened by debts exceeding £2 billion due to failed investments in large-scale projects. The council has since been compelled to implement severe austerity measures, including significant tax increases, service closures, and asset sales.
- **Spelthorne Borough Council** faces over £1 billion in debt from investments in commercial properties. A recent audit revealed "significant weaknesses" in financial record-keeping, inadequate plans to address looming budget gaps, and concerns over governance and internal culture.
- **Guildford Borough Council** is confronting a challenging financial future, with projected budget gaps escalating to £5.9 million by 2028/29. The council has acknowledged the need for cost reductions and increased income to manage these pressures.

Epsom and Ewell's Prudent Financial Management

In contrast, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has consistently balanced its budgets or been able to use reserves to meet its obligations, demonstrating fiscal discipline and effective financial stewardship. This prudent management has enabled the council to maintain most services and infrastructure without accruing unsustainable debt levels.

The Justice of Debt Redistribution

The proposed reorganisation raises a critical question: Is it just for residents of financially prudent boroughs like Epsom and Ewell to assume responsibility for the substantial debts incurred by other councils? Merging councils into larger unitary authorities could lead to a pooling of assets *and liabilities*, potentially obliging Epsom and Ewell's residents to contribute to servicing debts they had no part in accumulating.

This scenario not only challenges principles of fiscal fairness but also risks penalising councils that have exercised sound financial management. It is imperative to consider whether it is equitable for residents to bear the financial burdens resulting from the mismanagement of neighbouring authorities.

Calls for Government Intervention

Recognising the potential injustice, Surrey County Council's leader, Councillor Tim Oliver, has advocated for central government to write off the significant debts of councils like Woking before proceeding with devolution plans. This approach aims to mitigate the financial risks associated with high debt levels and prevent the unfair distribution of financial burdens across the county. How likely is it that a Labour Government will write off a debt accumulated by Woking under its previous Conservative led Council?

The Path Forward

As discussions about local government reorganisation progress, it is crucial to ensure that any new structures are underpinned by principles of fiscal responsibility and equity. Potential solutions include:

- **Debt Segregation:** Isolating the debts of heavily indebted councils to prevent them from being transferred to newly formed unitary authorities.
- **Government Debt Relief:** Advocating for central government intervention to alleviate or write off unsustainable debts, ensuring that the financial missteps of certain councils do not adversely impact the entire county.
- **Transparent Financial Assessments:** Conducting comprehensive financial evaluations of all councils involved

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in the reorganisation to inform fair and equitable decision-making.

The proposed reorganisation of Surrey's local government presents an opportunity to enhance efficiency and service delivery at the cost of Borough based democracy. However, it also necessitates careful consideration of the financial implications for all residents. Epsom and Ewell's community, having benefited from prudent financial management, should not be unduly burdened by the debts of other councils. It is incumbent upon policymakers to design a reorganisation framework that upholds fiscal justice, ensuring that the residents of Epsom and Ewell are not unfairly disadvantaged in the pursuit of broader administrative reforms.

Related reports:

All change! Epsom and Ewell Borough Council approaching its final stop?

Surrey's Conservative leader wants to postpone May's poll reckoning

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

Will Epsom and Ewell be bailing out Woking?

3 February 2025



Debt-ridden Woking Borough Council has approved the sale of two more assets as it continues slashing its way to a balanced budget.

The bankrupt authority, with debts of more than £2billion, is undergoing a full review of the buildings it owns as it's forced to sell them off to try to ease the burden on the taxpayer if and when a Government bailout happens.

The two most recent sell offs are the Egley Road Barn Site and Sheerwater Nursery. They are currently being used by the Woking Gymnastics Club and a charity.

Woking Borough Council went effectively bankrupt in 2023 on the back of a failed investment strategy to regenerate parts of the borough and has since had to raise its share of tax by 10 per cent, close a raft of public services including toilets, lose about 60 staff members and stop funding to community groups.

Borough leader Councillor Anne-Marie Barker told the Thursday January 16 executive committee: "It's part of our asset disposal program to help to reduce the debt at Woking Council."

The meeting heard that an earlier bid to sell Egley Road had fallen through but a second offer had since been accepted.

Councillor Dale Roberts said: "The purchaser progressed their offer in good faith but has ultimately withdrawn. The recommendation is to transact with the next highest bidder.

"The recommended purchaser, the new bidder, has submitted the highest financial offer on a conditional basis subject to planning."

Exact details of what this is, and the value of the bids, are still being kept private.

He added: "These decisions aren't purely economic, it's a key factor for this council of course as it's engaged in an asset disposal and debt reduction programme but it's not purely economic" and that the decision "also aligned with the Woking for all strategy".

He said: "It will help deliver a thriving community through partnerships."

Tenants Woking Gymnastics Club has been sent what the council calls a "letter of assurance" outlining what help the authority can provide going forward "in terms of balancing everyone's interest".

Cllr Roberts said: "We are doing everything we can though with Woking Gymnastics Club to facilitate their extension at the new site at Kingfield.

He added: "The disposal will facilitate the regeneration of the site.

"It will complement the existing development of residential land on the adjacent land holding and it will increase the provision of homes within the borough.

"It will also of course generate a capital receipt."

The Sheerwater site, in Blackmore Crescent, has been sold to a "special purchaser because advantages have been found for their ownership that would not be available to other buyers."

The two-storey community building, together with parking and a garden, does not currently provide the council with any

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rental income. It is being let to a charity that leases the entire site for free. The charity licences part of the building to a children's nursery with the income retained by the charity to support its operation.

The report into the sale read: "The authority recognises that this may require difficult decisions to be made as part of the wider transformation policy and an important priority for the council is to revise its approach to property ownership and to identify opportunities to raise both income and capital receipts from the disposal of surplus properties within the context of supporting current/future council expenditure/debt.

Will Epsom and Ewell be bailing out Guildford?

3 February 2025



A Surrey council faces tough decisions in the future after receiving a "very difficult financial settlement from the government".

Guildford Borough Council has no extra funding to meet inflation and demand pressures, meaning it will have to cut costs and increase income to make ends meet. Cost pressures looming over the council stand at over £3m, with National Insurance increases and developments causing the most strain.

The local authority said it has been told the settlement it would receive from the government for the financial year 2025/26. However, the "significant change" for the next year is Guildford council will not have a cash increase despite an assumed council tax rise of 2.99%.

Even though residents and businesses may face increased council tax and business rates, without extra government funding, the authority's overall "Core Spending Power" will remain the same," the council's report stated.

No additional funding is coming to meet the cost of pay awards from the central government, inflation and demand pressures. Guildford Council is therefore reliant upon cost reduction and increasing income to meet these costs. Richard Bates, Guildford Council's Chief Financial Officer, said: "In the light of a poor settlement, we've done the best we can."

The projected budget gap is expected to grow from 0 in 2025 to potentially £5.9m in four years (2028/29) with a at least a £1.6m increase every year, Service costs from the council are projected to rise from £16.4m in 2025/26 to potentially £20.3m in 2028/29.

Council officers said they will be looking to attack the gap with a series of measures, including budget reviews across the board, service reviews, and comparing charges (e.g. Car parking) with neighbouring councils.

Cost pressures facing the council currently stand at around £3.18m, with the biggest demands coming from firstly the rise in National Insurance and then capital spending on developments.

National Insurance (NI) increases were announced in the Chancellor's autumn statement and the combined cost of these changes adds up to around £1,000 per employee, according to council documents. Not only affecting public bodies, the rise in NI costs could impact contractors and suppliers to the council and push up costs further.

The government is providing some support to public sector employees, but the actual amounts were not announced as part of the provisional settlement. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said it plans to put £69bn into council budgets across England.

Paying for the council's "ambitious" building programme is a significant part of the financial gap, with large amounts being borrowed for major schemes like the Weyside Urban Village development. However, the cost of borrowing has increased significantly since many of the major schemes in the capital programme were approved, in line with the council's report.

Although the 10-year-project will require significant borrowing, the council is managing the levels of debt by selling assets. Officers have warned that a borrowing strategy for the next few years will be "critical" to ensure interest costs are minimised and that long term deals are secured at competitive and affordable rates.

However, the Chief Finance Officer said in his report that the "on-going inflation pressure on land values leave a significant projected deficit on [the Weyside Urban Village] scheme". He added that a "mitigation strategy needs to be agreed in Spring '25".

A decision on the council's medium term budget (2025/2026- 2028/29) will be made at full council on February 5.

Outside Guildford Borough Council (Credit: Google Street View)

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EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

19th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

Will Epsom and Ewell be bailing out Spelthorne?

3 February 2025



“Significant weaknesses” in a council’s financial records have been laid bare in a new report.

External auditors for Spelthorne Borough Council said they could not fully assess or complete the financial statements as there was inadequate record keeping. Many queries remained unanswered, said auditors, who reported they were unable to conclude on the 2023/2024 closing balances.

“Without complete and accurate information, the Council cannot have full confidence in the financial decisions reached,” the report said. “The finance papers are detailed but, in our judgement, can be confusing to follow, contain contradictory information in the same paper and lack a clear narrative by way of explanation.”

Spelthorne Council has not fully addressed the funding gaps and risks within its financial plan, according to the report. The latest outline budget for 2025/26 reported in December 2024 shows the council closing its £0.3m funding gap in 2025/26 but it has larger gaps of £3.5m and £5.4m predicted for the following consecutive financial years 2026/27 and 2027/28. The report said the council does not have agreed plans to address the budget gaps which amount to around 15-20 per cent of net revenue expenditure.

Although the council has a significant amount of investment properties for which it receives commercial rents, auditors found recording keeping for monitoring the key leases was “inadequate”. The council had around £52m in commercial rents in 2023/24 but auditors could not be assured by the amount recognised and the cash received.

The “uncomfortable” report made for “stark reading” by both councillors and officers. Councillor Karen Howkins told members Spelthorne “is a council in crisis” at an Audit Committee council meeting on January 28.

Auditors raised concerns that the minimum revenue position (MRP) – the amount of money the council must put aside in its budget each year to ensure it can repay debt incurred for capital expenditure- is likely to have been played down significantly. But auditors said they did not have enough evidence to conclude this was the case.

Spelthorne Council is currently facing over £1bn debt from investing in shops and offices, including Elmsleigh Retail Centre in Staines. Paying this sum for the next 50 years, auditors stressed the council were not “effectively managing” the risk.

Auditors also highlighted issues around Spelthorne’s accounts for purchasing three commercial properties including Carter Building, Thames Tower and Porter Building- worth £351m. The report reads that Spelthorne council only paid £297.9m for the properties and the total figure was ‘grossed up’ by £53.7m to include tax and added the debt to its balance sheet.

The first audit the council has received since 2017/18, auditors noted auditing requirements and have changes and standards have increased. The report also highlighted issues with council staff not having capacity or capability to carry out or send through the work required for the audit.

Officers said a training session will be provided for council staff and, in future, staff will be separated between those working on the audit and those working on the council’s overall budget setting.

Several issues and weaknesses were identified during the audit and 16 recommendations have been put forward.

The report flagged “significant weaknesses” in governance arrangements and “extremely poor relationships” between some political groups is impacting the council’s financial management. Auditors recommended the council “urgently” address the issue of trust and apparent “toxic culture” between members and officers.

An LGA Peer review in November 2022 concluded: “There is poor behaviour by some councillors towards each other and staff which is widely recognised as damaging the council’s reputation. It is also affecting staff morale and the organisation’s ability to retain and recruit staff.” As of January 2025 there have been 10 complaints outstanding with the monitoring officer regarding councillor behaviour.

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

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ISSN 2753-2771

Surrey County tax increase vote

3 February 2025

Valuation band	Core precept	ASC precept	Overall precept
A	£1,039.83	£191.07	£1,230.90
B	£1,213.13	£222.92	£1,436.05
C	£1,386.44	£254.76	£1,641.20
D	£1,559.74	£286.61	£1,846.35
E	£1,906.35	£350.30	£2,256.65
F	£2,252.96	£413.99	£2,666.95
G	£2,599.57	£477.68	£3,077.25
H	£3,119.48	£573.22	£3,692.70

A council tax hike could be hitting Surrey as members take the first look at the county's budget. Residents could see a maximum increase of 4.99 per cent on council tax, meaning a rise of £1.69 a week for a Band D household.

The proposed increase, which would come into force from April, was agreed by the cabinet on January 28 and will be voted on at Surrey Council's budget meeting next week on 4 February.

"I absolutely recognise the pressure that any increase in council tax will put on households," said Tim Oliver OBE, Surrey County Council leader, at the cabinet meeting. But the leader added increasing council tax was important to "balance our budget and to ensure we can continue to deliver improved and increased services meeting the demand we know we will experience".

Surrey county council said there is a significant pressure on this year's budget due to the rising demand for services, like adult social care and children's home to school transport, combined with inflation and added national insurance contributions- which has resulted in a higher cost of delivery.

Council documents state that for the local authority to balance the books, it has to hike up council tax by the maximum 2.99 per cent, and increase the Adult Social Care Precept by 2 per cent.The final budget for 2025/26 proposes total funding of £1,264.1m, an increase of £55.7m from 2024/25.

Currently a Band D property pays £1,758.60 a year in council tax, but following the maximum increase in tax, residents could see themselves forking out almost £88 extra. This would bring the total up to £1,846.35 a year. People living in Band H properties could have to cough up £3,692.70 a year for the county council.

This does not take into account other charges in a household's council tax bill, such as parish precepts, or the police and crime commissioner's precept. Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Lisa Townsend, has heavily indicated she wants the precept to increase by roughly 4.3 per cent. A decision on the PCC's budget is also due on Monday February 3.

Council reports state the local authority "continues to see exponential increases in demand for services" particularly adult and children's social care as well as Home to School Travel Assistance. It adds that the demand for these services has resulted in a "need for further efficiencies", or cuts, within the services and increasing council tax to balance the books.

Draft proposals show the Adult social care budget has been increased by £18.7m and the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning budget (which includes home to school transport) has gone up by £19.2m. However, the county council is also making 'efficiency savings' or cuts to the departments, £33m and £12.6m respectively.

The increase in council tax comes after the new government announced a rise in both the National Living Wage and in Employer's National Insurance Contributions. Not only will this increase the county council's own wage bill, it may impact its suppliers and potentially lead to increased costs all round. Compensation funding for local councils was not confirmed in the provisional Local Government Financial Settlement, leaving Surrey with some uncertainty.

Speaking to the cabinet, Cllr Oliver said the council has seen "higher levels of inflation than predicted", an increase in national insurance contributions and national living wage, as well as the cost of borrowing for capital investment has continued to rise as interest rates remain high. The council leader also pointed out the increased demand for services, particularly mental health, and pressures on the health system.

"We have achieved financial stability and we are not in the same position as many other authorities across the country," said Cllr Oliver. "We have not asked the government for extra financial support and we are not proposing to seek a referendum on increasing our council tax above the permitted 4.99 per cent."

Heathrow expansion reaction

3 February 2025

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Heathrow has been given the go ahead to press forward with plans for third runway that will bring in hundreds of thousands of extra flights to the West London airport every year, the Chancellor has announced – but questions remain about how deliverable the project will be.

The airport has long pressed for a third runway. The plans in the past have involved demolishing the mediaeval village of Harmondsworth and its neighbours Sipson and Harlington.

Feasibility studies have also been carried out about re-routing the M25 through a tunnel under the new northern runway and the enormous infrastructure project is supposed to be built while the country meets its environmental targets.

Heathrow has welcomed the Chancellor’s announcement today that the Government is backing a third runway – and would be inviting proposals to be brought forward by the summer.

The government has already tightened legal pathways against any plans, cutting the number of appeals allowed from three down to just one.

Opponents, including the London Mayor’s office, MPs and campaign groups however, argue a third runway won’t bring in hoped-for economic benefits but will raise “serious environmental and health concerns”.

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, said: “I remain opposed to a new runway at Heathrow Airport because of the severe impact it will have on noise, air pollution and meeting our climate change targets.

“I will scrutinise carefully any new proposals that now come forward from Heathrow, including the impact it will have on people living in the area and the huge knock-on effects for our transport infrastructure.

“Despite the progress that’s been made in the aviation sector to make it more sustainable, I’m simply not convinced that you can have hundreds of thousands of additional flights at Heathrow every year without a hugely damaging impact on our environment.”

Stanwell Moor is the Surrey village at the end of Heathrow’s southern runway.

Residents there have grown used to jet engines flying overhead. So much so, that some regard the noise made from incoming planes a respite compared with the roar when taking off.

The Stanwell Moor Residents’ Association, in a statement published on its website, said: “What is different this time is that easterly alternation planning application will go ahead regardless of the airport expansion and would lead to more flights over our village; and secondly, the Government are likely to reform planning to speed up the approval for expansion.

“We will be ready to represent the village with a list of demands that put residents first.”

The Government said it would issue a full assessment of any expansion plans through the Airports National Policy Statement.

It said the project must represent value for money and that it, plus any associated service transport costs, will be financed through private funding to “ensure that a third runway is delivered in line with our legal, environmental and climate objectives.”

Paul Beckford, policy director at the HACAN clearskies group said: “The announcement today will disappoint the thousands of residents whose communities will be destroyed by a third runway and the millions who will be exposed to increases in noise and air pollution.

“Labour have set four tests that any airport expansion must pass in order to be approved and we believe that Heathrow’s current plans are simply not compatible with those tests.

“The Government believes that it can achieve both growth and meet its climate targets but this decision puts both of those ambitions at risk.

“Expanding the UK’s largest emitter of carbon in a forlorn hope of increasing GDP at some point in the future without a credible plan to deliver zero emission aviation is a folly of the highest order.”

The Liberal Democrats issued a statement from its MPs saying the third runway would jeopardise the UK’s climate commitments and will have a significant negative impact on local communities and human health.

The hundreds of thousands of extra flights to-and-from Heathrow, they said, will increase the risk of health conditions including heart disease, strokes and mental health issues.

MP for Esher and Walton Monica Harding said: “A third runway at Heathrow would have a profound impact on our climate, health, and communities. With a lack of clarity on the economic benefits and costs to the taxpayer, along with serious environmental and health concerns, the Government must urgently address these questions.”

Others, such as the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport UK were quick to praise the announcement but

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ISSN 2753-2771

cautioned the importance of prioritising environmental concerns.

Its chairperson, Paul Le Blond, said “Any expansion strategy must prioritise public transport integration, leveraging existing transport hubs and accommodating new rail links.

“The development should include modernised terminals and new gateway facilities for both the northern and southern perimeters. Crucially, all environmental impacts—including noise, local air quality, and greenhouse gas emissions—must remain within statutory limits.

“Whilst the expansion would be privately funded through passenger and shipping revenues, government support through policy frameworks and strategic rail investment will be essential to unlock private sector investment.”

Related reports:

“Blocks away” from airport expansions

Surrey village to suffer a lot more Heathrow flights

Chance for Epsom and Ewell’s say on Heathrow flights

Parliament’s sting in the tail for Epsom and Ewell WASPIs lamented by local MP

3 February 2025



Helen Maguire, the Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, has expressed her disappointment after a parliamentary vote on compensating WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality) claimants failed to gain cross-party support. Maguire, who voted in favour of the bill, said she was “proud” to back the proposal, which sought to address what she described as a “gross injustice” affecting thousands of women in the constituency and across the UK.

The bill was introduced following an independent report that concluded that many women born in the 1950s had suffered an injustice due to a failure by successive governments to properly inform them of changes to the state pension age. However, the measure failed to secure enough support in Parliament, with Conservative and Labour MPs voting against it or abstaining.

What is the WASPI Campaign?

The WASPI campaign was formed in 2015 to highlight the plight of women born in the 1950s who were affected by changes to the state pension age. Prior to reforms enacted by the Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2011, women in the UK could retire at 60, while men retired at 65. The government decided to equalise the pension age for men and women, eventually raising it to 66 for both. However, many women argue they were not adequately informed about these changes in time to make necessary financial adjustments.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) found that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) failed to communicate the pension changes properly, leading to significant hardship for many women who had planned their retirements based on the previous system.

Local Impact and Political Response

According to data from the House of Commons Library, 5,420 women in Epsom & Ewell are believed to have been affected by these pension changes. Many have reported financial distress, as they were forced to continue working or adjust to an unexpected delay in receiving their pensions.

Speaking after the vote, Maguire criticised both Labour and Conservative MPs for failing to back the compensation plan. “For years, senior Labour representatives and even the Prime Minister himself pledged to deliver fair compensation to those impacted by changes these women had no control over. They made a conscious political choice to break that promise and ignore the findings of the independent watchdog,” she said.

“For Conservative and Labour MPs to fail to back these women is an immense disappointment. All they are asking for is fairness,” Maguire continued. “I, alongside my fellow Liberal Democrat MPs, will continue to stand up for the WASPI women at every turn and keep fighting until they get the justice that they deserve.”

The Wider Debate

The issue of state pension reform has been contentious for years, with successive governments arguing that the changes

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ISSN 2753-2771

were necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the pension system. The government has so far resisted calls for direct compensation, citing fiscal constraints, but campaigners argue that the lack of proper notification has left many women financially disadvantaged through no fault of their own.

The failure of the bill to progress means that WASPI women and their supporters will need to continue pressing their case in Parliament and beyond. With growing political pressure and the findings of the PHSO still pending further action, the fight for compensation is likely to remain a key issue in the coming months.

For now, Maguire has pledged to keep up the pressure, but with the major parties unwilling to back compensation at this stage, it remains to be seen whether justice will be delivered for the thousands of affected women in Epsom & Ewell and beyond.

Heritage at the heart of Epsom and Ewell

3 February 2025



The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council convened on January 23rd, to address several key issues, including the annual Heritage Champion's statement, fees and charges for 2025/26, budget estimates, and an urgent decision regarding the local development scheme. The meeting, held at the Epsom Town Hall and broadcast online, saw a full agenda with a number of significant decisions taken.

Heritage Champion's Report Praised

A highlight of the evening was the presentation of the Heritage Champion's annual statement by Councillor **Kim Spickett** (RA Cuddington). This was the first such statement that Committee Chair, Councillor **Peter O'Donovan** (RA Ewell Court), could recall seeing. Councillor Spickett, unfortunately, was not present at the meeting due to a prior engagement at the Epsom Playhouse (The Band of the Scots Guard: Gala Concert staged by Cllr **Dr Graham Jones** MBE RA Cuddington, for the Mayor's charities), but her report was met with high praise from committee members.

Councillor **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) lauded the "enthusiasm and the depth of the research" in her report, adding that "it really does show… that there is such a deep heritage in Epsom". Councillor **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) echoed this sentiment, saying "ditto that" and praised Councillor Spickett for her work in trying to trace the culverts in the area. Councillor O'Donovan also acknowledged the work done, noting "it is a remarkable work and it shows you what I think, really, what a champion should be providing". The committee unanimously resolved to receive and note the annual statement of the Heritage Councillor Champion.

The Heritage Champion's report detailed a number of local heritage projects. Some examples include:

- **St. Martin of Tours Church:** Councillor Spickett detailed a fact-finding mission related to the car park, noting issues of ownership, access permissions, and the involvement of English Heritage and the Church of England. She also highlighted a musket ball lodged in the old wall, masonry around the steps and a red granite edging under the tarmac. Her report also focused on how non-permeable areas in town displace water and cause surface flooding, a problem she has experience of with the South East Rivers' Trust.
- **D-Day 80 Commemoration:** Councillor Spickett was tasked with designing a badge for the Girl Guides and Scouts to commemorate D-Day. She also provided research material for a reading at the ceremony, which was a letter home from Captain Gerald Ritchie.
- **Mysterious Streams and Tunnels:** Councillor Spickett discussed her interest in the borough's hidden history, including the industrial past of the Pound Lane/Kiln Lane area. She made reference to the brickworks that sprang up all over the borough.
- **The Hogsmill River:** Councillor Spickett detailed a project that aimed to raise awareness of the importance of a clean river. This involved the creation of an information lectern at the Hogsmill Tavern, with funds from a Surrey County Council grant.
- **Old Barn in Woodcote Ward:** Councillor Spickett has been investigating an old barn, with the help of local photographer, Richard, noting a need for its sympathetic restoration.
- **Shadbolt Park** Councillor Spickett has worked with officers to develop a heritage and natural history information board.
- **Park Wall to the Durdans** Councillor Spickett has met with Councillor Liz Frost to look at a listed clunch wall

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ISSN 2753-2771

which is covered in graffiti.

- **Royal Connections at Durdans** Councillor Spickett has detailed connections to the Royal Family and scientists who have stayed at the Durdans.

Fees and Charges for 2025/26 Approved The committee then moved to discuss and approve the fees and charges for the upcoming financial year. A council officer explained that pre-application advice and planning performance agreement fees would remain at the 2024/25 level. However, planning application fees, which are set nationally, are expected to increase by the Retail Price Index (RPI) from April 2025. Many general licensing fees were set to increase by 6%, whilst taxi licensing fees would mostly remain unchanged due to a rise in operators, except for Hackney Carriage and Private Hire drivers whose fees would increase by 3% and 7%, respectively, and missed appointments without notice rising by 7.7%.

Councillor **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) raised a question about some of the licensing fees, wondering “do we really have all these things going on? I mean, I’m not aware how many zoos do we have”. A council officer clarified that there was one zoo. Councillor Phil Neale also asked about additional charges for retrospective planning applications. A council officer clarified that these are set nationally and not included in local fees. The committee resolved to agree on the fees and charges for 2025/26 as set out in the appendices.

Budget Estimates for 2025/26 The committee also reviewed the budget estimates for licensing and planning policy services for the next financial year. A council officer reported that the second quarter outturn for 2024/25 showed no net variance against the budget. The base net budget for 2025/26 is set at £1.279 million, compared to £1.237 million for 2024/25. An additional £94,000 is expected in revenue, which will be used to fund additional staff and a new software system.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) asked whether expenditures relating to the local plan were included in the budget. A council officer clarified that these costs are funded from reserves and strategy resources, but the costs of staff working on the local plan were included within the planning policy section of the budget. The committee resolved to recommend the 2025/26 service estimates for approval at the full council budget meeting in February.

Urgent Decision on Local Development Scheme

Finally, the committee noted an urgent decision made by the Director of Environment, Housing, and Regeneration regarding the Local Development Scheme. A council officer explained that the scheme needed to be updated to align with a new government timetable. This required moving the consultation period to December and the submission to March, rather than the previously scheduled dates of January and May. The committee resolved to note the urgent decision and the reasons for it.

The meeting concluded with the committee having made important decisions regarding the borough’s planning and licensing policies, demonstrating their commitment to the efficient operation of local governance.

Related report:

Heritage at Risk: Epsom Town Centre Conservation Area Faces Challenges

Image: A spoof Epsom and Ewell Times report contained in Cllr Spickett’s Heritage Report. Click HERE to see her full report within the “Reports Pack” presented to the LPPC councillors. We are taking no action for the unauthorised breach of copyright of our logo!

Sutton and Epsom rugby away win

3 February 2025



SIDCUP 24 SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 34. Saturday 25th January. Crescent Farm has produced a bounteous harvest this season with a maximum crop yield of 35 points from a magnificent seven wins. In addition, last season’s visit by Sutton and Epsom was seen by many levelheaded observers as the nadir of that campaign. Originally planned for January 18th, before the intervention of Jack Frost, this fixture came with the usual proviso of a rescheduled match: Who is available? In a quality encounter, Sutton and Epsom, playing their best rugby of the season, inflicted the first home defeat of the season on Sidcup by 34-24.

The Black & Whites welcomed back Messrs Johnson & Lennie to the front row union but were bereft of the veteran Munford and Number 8 Rob Hegarty who had scored a hat trick against Old Tiffinians the previous Saturday. Job 1:21 springs to mind. The hosts kicked off in glorious sunshine on a windless afternoon. S&E were swiftly into their stride

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ISSN 2753-2771

opening their account after a few minutes. Freddy Bunting kicked a penalty to the 22 where Ewan McTaggart obliged with clean lineout ball. A dominant carry by Josh Glanville set up the backs and slick passing resulted in a Gareth O'Brien dummy and a try. Captain Bunting converted from the flank for 7-0. Sutton now demonstrated vastly improved kicking from hand with the highlight being a sublime 50-22 from Tom Lennard. Sidcup have conceded the least points by any club in the league this season so excellent defence was expected. A second try was denied but they came back for a penalty that Freddy Bunting nonchalantly converted for 10-0.

The home team hit back with multiple phases and great intent. Deep in the Sutton 22 they had a free ball and looked to cross the whitewash. It was the turn of the Surrey men to defend valiantly and the Kent team to have the consolation of a penalty. Josh Twyford obliged to trail by 3-10. It had been a thrilling start but the best was still to come. On the quarter hour Sutton produced their try of the season. The forwards carried with pace and conviction with Sam Lennie and Josh Glanville making gains. The ball was then passed along the backs with pace and precision to exploit an overlap, and winger Finlay Scott ran in untouched from near halfway. Freddy Bunting's conversion extended the advantage to 17-3 at the end of an inspired first quarter.

Sidcup fought hard to get back into the game but not only was S&E tackling first rate but also the coverage of the host's kicking game was most efficient. Another penalty gave Freddy Bunting the chance to put the Crescent Farm team into the corner. The lineout was secured but all momentum appeared to have dissipated, and the drive was halted. Sutton lost yards and were recycling the ball on the 22 when Number 9 Laurence Wise dummied at the ruck and made a clean break. Ben Tame's fine support run was rewarded with his try under the posts. A simple conversion added to the burgeoning Bunting account for the season for 24-3 on the half hour.

There was no easing off from the visitors. Playing with a high tempo combining powerful carrying from the pack and astute kicking from the backs, the hosts were forced to defend in their 22. With normal time nearly complete, winger Matt Symonds picked up a loose ball near touch as Sidcup tried to break out. The ball arrived at the Brobdingnagian lock Ewan McTaggart who strode towards glory only to be denied by courageous cover. Despite two 5-metre penalties under the posts, and Sidcup being reduced to 14 when Ben Ibrahim saw yellow for an additional 10-minute siesta, the visitors failed to extend their lead. S&E had replaced their front row in its entirety as Gibson, Hilton and Howes came off the bench, but despite these fresh legs the first period ended with no further addition to the scoreboard that read 24-3 to Sutton and Epsom.

Winning at home has not only become a habit but it is the norm for Sidcup this term. Sutton may have excelled in the first half with a comfortable lead at the break but all those present were expecting the hosts to raise their game. Still with the numerical advantage, the second half began where the first had left off with the Black & Whites besieging the home line after the Bunting restart was dropped on the 22 gifting S&E a scrum. Sweeping attacks, superb defence and the usual penalty kicked to the corner. However, there was variety as Sutton erred with an accidental offside followed by a Sidcup infringement on their put-in and culminating with S&E giving away a penalty at the ruck when in prime position. Would the visitors rue their failure to secure the fourth try either side of the break?

In the third quarter, Sutton and Epsom were forced into demonstrating their defensive qualities. They were assisted by a lack of discipline by the hosts. After a 5-metre lineout had been neutered, Sidcup had the consolation of a scrum under the posts. Not only did they concede a penalty but in addition a quizzical comment saw them retreat ten metres more a second time. The cacodoxy in rugby is to argue with the referee. The second 10-metre forced march for Sidcup hinted at an outbreak of logorrhoea from a certain quarter and Mr Pedro Diogo would not tolerate the dissentient voices. Finally, the hosts made their possession, territory, and pressure count. The popular combination of a penalty, kick to the corner and the catch & drive try. Replacement Harry Large was the beneficiary of the fine forward effort. The reliable boot of Josh Twyford added the extras and optimism swept through Crescent Farm as their team trailed 10-24.

Sutton reintroduced Lennie and Johnson for Howes and Hilton. The gains from the Sidcup goal were quickly negated by another penalty which gave Freddy Bunting the opportunity to extend the lead to 27-10. From the restart the Rugby Lane men tried to run it out of their 22 but knocked on. From the scrum the hosts took full advantage as the forwards carried deep into the 22 before centre Sam Leek's astute line of running saw him touchdown by the uprights. Josh Twyford made it 27-17 and the comeback was on. Ewan McTaggart then received a yellow card at the restart and suddenly the game took on an entirely new complexion. An emboldened Sidcup threw everything at the visitors and looked favourites to add another quick score. However, credit to the character of this current S&E vintage. They rallied, scrapped for every ball and were defensively dogged.

The decisive blow came with ten minutes to go and the Black & Whites still with 14. A loose ball was picked up by prop Dan Johnson. There is no more popular sight in rugby than a prop forward on the charge. This was a classic with an impressively high knee-lift he set off like a Highland warrior eager to decapitate an Englishman and bearing an expression of deranged ferocity as he covered the 40 metres to score unchallenged under the posts for a memorable first try for Sutton. Freddy Bunting chipped over the easiest of conversions for a 34-17 lead and a bonus point.

Returning to their full complement, the Black & Whites doubled down defensively and looked to control territory. A penalty was kicked to the 22 was followed by a fine grubber by Tom Lennard and the hosts were stuck deep in their own half. The game entered time added on and the deficit was too great but credit to Sidcup as they kept pressing. The Crescent Farm crowd were rewarded when their team scored their third try of the afternoon. A penalty was kicked into the corner and from the ideal platform of the 5-metre lineout they crossed the whitewash. Josh Twyford being presented with the close-range try after the hard yards from the forwards. He added the conversion for 24-34. There was just time for one more play but there was to be no further addition to the scoreboard and Sutton recorded a notable scalp winning away 34-24.

Without doubt, this was the performance of the season that has included fine wins over the table toppers at Rugby Lane on three separate occasions. It was a wonderful team effort from 1 to 18 with the forwards providing quality ball and the backs playing with a fluency not previously seen. Laurence Wise at 9 had an exceptional game for a man with only a handful of caps. The kicking game was unrecognisable from recent times, the defence was back to its high standards but

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ISSN 2753-2771

it was the tempo and continuity that really caught the eye. It needed a performance of this nature to defeat a Sidcup XV that has made Crescent Farm a fortress this season.

Next week, the Sutton charabanc heads to Medway who will be looking to redress the balance. They arrived at Rugby Lane in October in pole position and returned with a 28-24 defeat.

Sutton and Epsom: O'Brien, Symonds, Bibby, Bunting ©, Scott, Lennard, Wise, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Rea, Jones & Tame. Replacements: Hilton, Gibson & Howes.

Sidcup: Ellison, Sheridan, Leek, McMahon, Keeley, Twyford, Ibrahim, Conlon, Fordham, Carmen, Epps, Evans, Williams, Healey & West. Replacements: Gibbons, Large & Masters.

Epsom and Ewell car parking fees on new levels

3 February 2025



Epsom and Ewell Council Approves Changes to Car Parking Fees and Policies for 2025/26

In a meeting of the Environment Committee on 21 January 2025, councillors approved a series of changes to car parking fees and policies across the borough. The measures aim to address financial targets, enhance service provision, and offer new concessions for cultural activities. After detailed discussions, the committee voted to adopt the proposals, with amendments led by Councillor **Julie Morris** (LibDem, College).

Fee and Permit Adjustments

The committee voted (6 for, 1 against, 1 abstaining) to implement proposed changes to car park fees and permit prices for the 2025/26 financial year. Notable adjustments include:

- A 10% increase in parking fees at the Ashley Centre for up to 3 hours, rising from £5.00 to £5.50.
- Revisions to parking permits for residents and businesses.

Councillor Morris expressed concern about the annual increases in parking charges, stating, "We cannot be doing this year on year." She urged the council to explore alternative ways to balance the budget without consistently raising costs for residents. In response, Councillor **Liz Frost** (RA, Woodcote and Langley), Chair of the Committee, emphasized that not all charges were increasing, highlighting the reduction in evening parking fees under the new flat rate structure.

Special Concessions for Performers and Shoppers

Councillor Morris successfully secured amendments to the proposed concessions for Epsom Playhouse performers, crew, and technical teams. The adopted recommendation ensures these concessions align with current practice and take effect immediately. She also pushed for a defined timeframe for the Christmas parking concessions, resulting in the committee's agreement to offer discounted festive parking for the next two years.

The committee unanimously approved:

1. **Concessionary parking rates** for Playhouse-affiliated individuals, effective immediately.
2. The continuation of **discounted Christmas parking offers** for the next two years, aimed at boosting local shopping and economic activity during the festive period.

Simplified Evening Parking

The committee agreed to standardize evening parking charges across the borough. From Monday to Saturday, a flat rate will now apply:

- £5.00 for major car parks like the Ashley Centre.
- £2.50 for smaller facilities such as Dorset House and Stoneleigh Parade.

This change simplifies parking for residents and visitors, with some charges lower than before.

Implementation and Public Engagement

The Head of Housing & Community was authorized to implement the changes and address any public representations.

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Feedback from residents and businesses will be reviewed by the committee in March 2025.

Decision Breakdown

The resolutions were approved with varying levels of support:

- The fee and permit adjustments passed with six votes in favor, one against, and one abstention.
- Concessionary parking rates for Playhouse performers and Christmas offers were unanimously adopted.
- The Head of Housing & Community's authority to implement the changes was approved with five votes in favor, one against, and two abstentions.

Next Steps

The updated fees and concessions will take effect on 1 April 2025. Residents are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the changes and provide feedback to the council.

Councillors will continue to monitor the impact of the changes, balancing the need for sustainable revenue with affordability and accessibility for the community. The committee will revisit the parking policies in March 2025 to review public input and adjust as needed.

New artwork takes centre stage at Epsom Playhouse

3 February 2025



During January two new murals were completed at Epsom Playhouse. The murals are part of a series of vibrant public art installations across the borough. Championing the 40-year history of Epsom Playhouse, the large-scale mural in the theatre's foyer showcases the variety and breadth of creative people who have contributed to the fabric of Epsom Playhouse's history over the last four decades. The second mural and new photographic exhibition in the downstairs bar celebrates famed British Jazz singer and a trailblazing performer, Evelyn Dove. Championing the roaring 1920s and the Art Deco period, the large-scale installation reflects the era that Dove was at the peak of her performing career.

The latest murals were created in collaboration with residents. Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, and specialists in community art Positive Arts, consulted with residents during the Christmas lights switch on in the Ashley Centre in Epsom, at Bourne Hall in Ewell and members of Girlguiding Division Epsom also kindly shared their thoughts on the design of the main foyer mural.

Both murals have been fully funded via the Arts, Culture and Heritage UKSPF 2024/25 allocation and contribute to the council's overall vision for curating art projects that build pride with local community stakeholders, nurture creative talent and raise the profile of our borough's rich heritage.

The murals are the last in a series that have been painted across the borough.

So far, working with Positive Arts and community groups, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has created the following murals:

Upper High Street, Epsom – with GLF Schools

Alleyway behind Epsom Square – with Members of Girlguiding Epsom Division

Between Miles Road and Stones Road, Epsom – with GLF Schools

Near Clandon Close, Stoneleigh – with We Power On

Epsom Playhouse opened in 1984 as part of the development of The Ashley Centre and since opening has hosted a wide and varied programme of events featuring both professional and community productions.

The murals form part of improvement works taking place at Epsom Playhouse using an allocation of monies from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Improvements include a redesigned lower bar and a new bottle bar, clad in stainless steel. The upper bar has also been refurbished with new LED lighting and redesigned to create a larger space. There is also a new mezzanine floor, and a new platform lift has been installed to improve accessibility.

Commenting on the newly installed artworks, Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village), Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee said,

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“These new murals use a vibrant palette of colours, and I am sure will draw plenty for interest from residents, who’ll be impressed to see how this much-loved community venue has been revived!

The foyer mural illustrates visually how important regional theatres are in bringing arts and creativity to local areas for the benefit of local communities”

The refurbishment of Epsom Playhouse also supports Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s new Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy which outlines its commitment to nurturing creative talent and to creating a thriving and inclusive creative and cultural outreach programme within the borough.

Related reports:

Epsom Playhouse £1.50 per ticket fee from 1st April

Epsom Playhouse gets a 40 year uplift

A blast celebrates 40 years past of Epsom Playhouse

Our Star shines on Epsom Playhouse

Image: Epsom Playhouse bar mural

“Blocks away” from airport expansions

3 February 2025



So called “blockers” to major transport projects will be cleared in a move that looks set to curb challenges to Heathrow and Gatwick Airport expansions, the Government has announced.

The Prime Minister wants to curtail legal challenges to major decisions in what the Government describes as “unarguable cases” they say can cause “years of delay and hundreds of millions of cost to projects that have been approved by democratically elected ministers.”

Instead, the legal system will be overhauled with campaigners given just one attempt at a legal challenge for “cynical cases lodged purely to cause delay rather than three”. It comes after reports the chancellor Rachel Reeves said she was prepared to face down critics of plans to expand Heathrow Airport and Gatwick – arguing economic growth outweighed other concerns.

The Government has said this would balance the need for ongoing access to justice against what it describes as a “challenge culture” where small pressure groups obstruct decisions taken in the national interest. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said: “For too long, blockers have had the upper hand in legal challenges – using our court processes to frustrate growth. We’re putting an end to this challenge culture by taking on the NIMBYs and a broken system that has slowed down our progress as a nation. This is the government’s Plan for Change in action – taking the brakes off Britain by reforming the planning system so it is pro-growth and pro-infrastructure. The current first attempt, known as the paper permission stage, will be scrapped.

“Primary legislation will be changed so that where a judge in an oral hearing at the High Court deems the case Totally Without Merit, it will not be possible to ask the Court of Appeal to reconsider. To ensure ongoing access to justice, a request to appeal second attempt will be allowed for other cases.”

What the airports say

Heathrow has said it would wait until formal plans before commenting but that it strongly believed in its “vital role for the UK economy” and its long-held belief that expanding capacity at the UK’s hub airport was critical for economic growth.

A Heathrow spokesperson said: “Heathrow is the best-connected airport in the world. That competitive advantage for UK plc already enables over £200bn of British trade annually. But growing the economy means adding capacity at the UK’s hub airport which is full. That’s why we’re planning to unlock capacity by improving and upgrading our existing infrastructure, while also looking at potential options to deliver a third runway at Heathrow in line with strict tests on carbon, noise and air quality.”

Stewart Wingate, CEO of London Gatwick said: “We can be a major part of the Government’s drive for growth. We are already contributing over £5.5billion to the UK economy and supporting over 76,000 jobs, but unless we can access

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greater airport capacity the UK will miss out on opportunities to enhance global connectivity and unlock further opportunities for trade, tourism and job creation. Bringing our Northern Runway into routine use, through a £2.2 billion privately financed, shovel-ready investment will create 14,000 jobs and generate £1 billion a year in economic benefits.

“The project, which is due for government approval early next year, could be operational by the end of the decade. We have put forward a strong and compelling case focused around making best use of our existing infrastructure, minimising noise and environmental impacts and meeting the four ‘tests’ for airport expansion set by Labour.”

The average legal challenge takes about 18 months to resolve and more than half of of all major infrastructure decisions were taken to court.

Campainers will not rest

Paul Beckford, the chairperson of the HACAN clearskies campaign group challenges the notion that expanding the airport would bring the craved-for growth.

He says that at best it could bring in £3.3bn over 60 years and that 75 per cent of passengers using a third runway would likely be transfer passengers “who contribute nothing to the economy”. He also said that Heathrow expansion would not be in a vacuum and instead “suck growth” from the regions.

Government’s own figures show that a third runway at Heathrow would suck growth from the regions, citing Department for Transport Aviation Forecasts that suggested “expansion at Heathrow would see 170,000 fewer flights per year from regional airports than if expansion does not take place”.

Mr Beckford said: “Local communities around Heathrow represent nearly a third of all people across Europe exposed to levels of aircraft noise that harms their health. If Heathrow were to expand the Government would expose over two million people to increases in noise pollution in spite of a deepening evidence base of the negative health impacts, particularly at night. Such expansion would increase the emissions of the country’s single largest source of carbon by around 9million tonnes per annum, which is incompatible with the UK’s climate targets.

“It would be a failure of duty for any Government to put the health of their citizens at risk in the forlorn hope of generating growth when we know that the business case is marginal at best and 75 per cent of passengers using any third runway would contribute nothing to the UK economy.”

Sally Pavey, who chair the CAGNE group that opposes expansion of Gatwick airport call the government’s decision a disgrace that ignored public opinion in order to build a new runway by stealth. She said: “If this story is true it opens the door to us communities concerned about the decline in our wellbeing to benefit the shareholders of Gatwick Airport. Any airport expansion shows a lack of understanding and priority placed by this government towards global warming and yet we see the signs constantly on the news of flooding, fires and rising temperatures.

“Aviation is one of the biggest polluters this planet suffers and yet a new runway would add extra carbon a year plus greenhouse gases, and there are no true decarbonising factors that will reduce this as with more planes comes more CO2 and noise. CAGNE has been at the forefront of opposing this new runway due to the lack of infrastructure, lack of workers, decline in air quality and unbelievable increase in noise as Gatwick would be as big as Heathrow today.

“Gatwick already has serious issues with noise and yet we were not allowed to include the modernisation of airspace that Gatwick is reliant upon to reach its economic growth goals with two runway operation. This is just one of the reasons we will be legally challenging a decision to allow a new runway at Gatwick. We have already started to fundraise to legally challenge a decision to allow two runway operations as there were so many flaws in the evidence provided by Gatwick at the DCO hearings, this news story, if factual, is just another reason to challenge a new runway decision.”

Surrey Uni making self-driving cars safer

3 February 2025



With self-driving cars expected to hit British roads next year (2026), a new motion forecasting framework developed by the University of Surrey and Fudan University, China, promises to make autonomous cars both safer and smarter.

Researchers have combined their expertise to create RealMotion – a novel training system that seamlessly integrates historical and real-time scene data with contextual and time-based information, paving the way for more efficient and reliable autonomous vehicle technology.

Dr Xiatian Zhu, senior lecturer at the Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing and the Insitute for People-Centred AI at the University of Surrey and co-author of the study, said:

“Driverless cars are no longer a futuristic dream. Robotaxis are already operating in parts of the USA and China, and self-driving vehicles are expected to be on UK roads as early as next year. However, the real question on everyone’s mind is:

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ISSN 2753-2771

how safe are they?

“While AI operates differently from human drivers, there are still challenges to overcome. That’s why we developed RealMotion – to equip the algorithm with not only real-time data but also the ability to integrate historical context in space and time, enabling more accurate and reliable decision-making for safer autonomous navigation.”

Existing motion forecasting methods typically process each driving scene independently, overlooking the interconnected nature of past and present contexts in continuous driving scenarios. This limitation hinders the ability to accurately predict the behaviours of surrounding vehicles, pedestrians and other agents in ever-changing environments.

In contrast, RealMotion creates a clearer understanding of different driving scenes. Integrating past and present data enhances the prediction of future movements, addressing the inherent complexity of forecasting multiple agents’ movements.

Extensive experiments conducted using the Argoverse dataset, a leading benchmark in autonomous driving research, highlight RealMotion’s accuracy and performance. Compared to other AI models, the framework achieved an 8.60% improvement in Final Displacement Error (FDE) – which is the distance between the predicted final destination and the true final destination. It also demonstrated significant reductions in computational latency, making it highly suitable for real-time applications.

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

“With self-driving cars reaching British roads imminently, ensuring people’s safety is paramount. The development of RealMotion by Dr Zhu and his team offers a significant advance on existing methods. By equipping autonomous vehicles to perceive their surroundings in real-time, and also leverage historical context to make informed decisions, RealMotion paves the way for safer and more intelligent navigation of our roads.”

While researchers encountered some limitations, the team plans to continue its research to further improve RealMotion’s capabilities and overcome any challenges. The framework has the potential to play a critical role in shaping the next generation of autonomous vehicles, ensuring safer and more intelligent navigation systems for the future.

About the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI (PAI)

Taking a different approach to much AI activity in the UK, the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI puts the needs of individuals and society at the very heart of everything it does: we believe that the starting point for AI should be people rather than technology.

This people-centred approach drives our research and enables us to design AI technologies and systems that are ethical, responsible, and inclusive. The pan-University Institute brings together Surrey’s core AI-related expertise in vision, speech and signal processing, computer science, and mathematics, with its domain expertise across engineering and physical sciences, human and animal health, law and regulation, business, finance and the arts and social sciences. With this distinctive approach, PAI builds on Surrey’s track record of collaboration with industry, the public sector, government and other relevant institutions to develop solutions to shared challenges.

Image: Waymo self-driving vehicle. Credit Grendelkhan CC by SA 4

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