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

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Watching out for tomorrow’s film talent in Epsom and Ewell

17 December 2024



Creative Media students from North East Surrey College of Technology (Nescot) were joined by their tutors, family and friends for the premiere of their short film, ‘The Watching’ which was screened at Epsom Picturehouse last week.

The Watching’ was filmed on location in the South Downs in November by Nescot’s Level 4 and HND Creative Media students as part of their domestic filming project. Written by and starring former student, Charlie McCarthy, ‘The Watching’, is a psychological drama, exploring themes of identity, state control and the human cost of forgetting, set against the desolate beauty of an isolated coastline.

Louise Gaskin, Head of Curriculum for Creative Industries at Nescot said, “A huge well done to our cast and crew. We are so proud of their efforts and hard work on this project which has resulted in, I think, one of the best films we’ve made as a department. Thank you to Epsom Picturehouse and Satisfied Eye International Film Festival for supporting our students, we were thrilled to be able to showcase our students’ film on the big screen.”

Abigail Partington-Moran, Creative Media tutor at Nescot added, “The students have worked really hard on this filming project and enjoyed themselves too. They’ve taken the early starts, late nights, cold weather and countless unit moves all in their stride. The project has given them the real-world experience of working on set, and alongside the technical film-making skills, they’ve also learnt team work, problem-solving and time management skills.”

After the film screening, key cast and crew members involved in the filming took to the stage for a Q&A session with Creative Media tutor demonstrator, Alex Marshall. They included, former student, Charlie McCarthy, Script Writer and Actor, and Sam Gower, Actor; HND student, Hannah Lealan, Producer; Level 4 student Frankie Hamley and HND student Nathan Elford, Directors and Level 4 student, Amani McKenzie, Script Supervisor.

Former student Charlie was part of Nescot’s Gold Medal winning Creative Media team at WorldSkills UK 2023. He said his inspiration for the script was the filming location, “I liked the idea of writing something satirical with reference to the beach. Everyone involved was brilliant and so dedicated all of the time. We had lots of fun making this film and I do hope audiences enjoy it.”

HND student, Nathan, who had the role of Director along with Level 4 student Frankie said, “We all worked really well together, there were no arguments which was great! Both Frankie and I collaborated to bring together the visual aspects of the film. The whole production was very professional. The experience has given me an idea of the job role I’d like to get into.”

“Even though it was stressful at times, it was good stress and taught us how to problem-solve. We have learnt a lot from this whole production. It has made us ready for the film-making industry,” added Frankie.

HND student, Hannah who had the role of Producer said, “We were essentially two different classes, working together. We turned a challenge from never having worked with someone before into an opportunity to develop, work and learn from each other. We had lots of fun on set between takes which made the experience enjoyable.”

Level 4 student Amani explained that as part of his role as Script Supervisor, he had to ensure there was continuity through the whole production from props to the actor’s lines, to make sure everything ran smoothly. “It’s been an amazing experience and has prepared us for handling industry-related situations. We are ready!” he said.

Nescot Creative Media alumnus and industry professional, Luke James was present for the screening. Addressing the students, he reminisced about working on a similar filming project nine years ago when he was a student at Nescot and offered them key advice. He said, “Filmmaking is a labour of love and there are endless opportunities in this industry. The opportunity to make something like this film is just so valuable, and you may not feel it now, but you should all be extremely proud of yourselves.”

‘The Watching’ has been entered into the Student Short (UK) category for the 2025 Satisfied Eye International Film Festival

Nescot’s Level 4 and HND Creative Media students on location for the filming of ‘The Watching’. Credit NESCOT

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Sutton & Epsom topple league leaders

17 December 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 20 Beckenham 19. Saturday 14th December.

For the final league match at Rugby Lane in 2024 the crowd were treated to the visit of the league leaders Beckenham. Twice previously this campaign have proud pole position players descended upon Cheam. Firstly, Sidcup were dispatched and then Medway had their colours lowered by the Black & Whites. Could Rugby Lane prove again to be a graveyard for the aspirations of the high-flying? This is the first of the reverse fixtures this season and the visitors' hopes were bolstered by their September success at Balmoral Avenue by 29-14. However, it was Sutton who triumphed 20-19 to collect, arguably, their most valuable scalp of the season.

After one week away Jordan Huie and Jac Davies returned for Sutton. The Black & Whites may have the Kiwi trio of Bibby, Lennie and Rea but Beckenham included Jamaican internationals Lamar Sinclair & Rimani Richards, Barbadian Sevens caps with the Caddy brothers in the centres as well as Messrs Aoke-Tiamu, Badger, Boyce & Kakoulidis from Australia added to the mix. Freddy Bunting set the game in motion on a dismally gray afternoon, thankfully free from rain, with a crosswind in his face. It was high tempo rugby from the outset as probing attacks were battered back by formidable defences. Rob Hegarty, who is enjoying an impressive season for S&E, made the first significant break to the 22 but his side failed to capitalise. Sadly, Beckenham lost their influential 15 Bradley Bateup to an horrific dislocated knee in the opening ten minutes.

The next S&E opportunity was snuffed out as the ball was stripped in contact. It was to be a feature of the first period that Sutton ball carriers became isolated and were consumed by Beckenham's predatory pack who were excellent at the breakdown. In addition, the league leaders, from the first whistle, showed a propensity to run the ball from defence. The abrasive and robust carrying of Liam Caddy was perfectly complemented by deft offloads of his brother Jake as they tried to utilise the power and pace of Jordan Gabriel and Zane Kakaloudis on the wings. The Black & White defence had to be on their mettle and they were equal to every challenge.

After a quarter of an hour the deadlock was finally broken. A Beckenham player strayed offside and Freddy Bunting calmly from 40 metres put his side 3-0 up. Having gathered the restart the hosts did not escape the perlustration of Mr Spencer Pearce who reciprocated with a kickable penalty for the visitors. The Balmoral Avenue side were not content with levelling the score but went in search of the lead as they kicked into the corner. The league leaders illustrated their promotion credentials by scoring in the corner despite resolute defence. After several phases Tom Ward, like all good 7s, was on hand to cross the whitewash. The touchline conversion failed but the Kent team led 5-3 at the end of the first quarter.

Poor passing by the Sutton & Epsom side on halfway led to a lightning counter by Beckenham. A stunning score was nipped in the bud by a trademark covering tackle by the ageless Steve Munford. Sutton rallied with a superb scrummage winning the ball against the head that initiated their best passage of play. The game was developing into a highly entertaining spectacle as dangerous attacks were neutered by extremely efficient defences. Unfortunately, just after the half hour the away side suffered a second significant departure as loose-head prop David Aoake-Tiamu hobbled off the park.

Half time was rapidly approaching but with two significant breaks for injuries there would be a healthy amount of afters to consume. Beckenham were holding Sutton in check until a stunning break by Tom Lennard saw him advance deep into the 22 and as he was enveloped by the defensive cover flanker Dan Jones was on hand to take the well timed pass under the posts. Captain Bunting chipped over the conversion for a 10-5 lead. The Black & Whites went in search of further glory and moment later Freddy Bunting was lining up a pop at the posts. The expectant crowd, so accustomed to the excellence of their kicker, were surprised to see the ball drift wide as Bunting missed kicks are as rare as Ben Duckett leaving a ball in a test match. The final opportunity fell to the visitors but their 5-metre lineout was bundled into touch to conclude the first half with the scoreboard reading Sutton & Epsom 10 Beckenham 5.

The hosts made a rapid start to the second period. Learning from the first half the forwards advanced was ably supported and Steve Munford enjoyed a stream of fast ball on the front foot. A stunning break by Gareth O'Brien propelled him into open space in the 22 but he selflessly passed to Rob Hegarty who ran in under the posts. Freddy Bunting completed the formalities for 17-5. This was a healthy lead though when returning prop Alex Mount vociferously declared: "They cannot live with us" it was met with ribald laughter from players on both sides. Everyone at Rugby Lane knew this game was far from over. It soon came to pass, five minutes later, that Beckenham were alive but not kicking as they declined the three-point option. Then another penalty meant the hosts were defending a 5-metre line out. Geordie Boyce secured the ball and hooker Lamar Sinclair muscled his way over despite the efforts of his opposite number Sam Lennie. Lewis Bunton added a sweetly struck conversion to reduce the deficit to 12-17.

The visitors pressed hard but Sutton held on. In the dying minutes, after a relentless forty-phase attack, a blocked drop-goal attempt from Lewis Bunton secured Sutton's 20-19 victory.

Sutton & Epsom

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O’Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Tame, McTaggart, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.
Replacements: Boaden, Davies & Hilton.

Beckenham
Bateup, Kakoulidis, Caddy J, Caddy L, Jordan, Bunton, Curtis, Aoake-Tiamu, Sinclair, Badger, Moran, Keefe ©, Boyce, Ward & Knowles.
Replacements: Richards, Latouche & Lovell.

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy

The Local Plan plot thickens after revised NPPF

17 December 2024



The Government’s revised **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**, published on 12 December, has set ambitious new housing targets, requiring local councils to accelerate their housebuilding efforts. This move coincides with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) updating its **Local Development Scheme**, which outlines the timetable for the borough’s Local Plan.

Under the updated scheme, EEBC’s **Regulation 19 Consultation** will take place from **20 December 2024 to 5 February 2025**, before the Local Plan is submitted for examination in March 2025. The council aims to complete the public examination by July 2025. The Proposed Submission Local Plan (2022–2040), which Councillors approved on 10 December, is intended to shield the borough from ad hoc developments and ensure sustainable planning decisions.

Councillor Peter O’Donovan, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, emphasised the importance of meeting these deadlines:

> *“We are determined to meet the Government’s deadlines and will do everything within our power to achieve them. I strongly urge residents and businesses to read and follow the consultation guidance so that their feedback can be sent to the Planning Inspectorate.”*

Government Targets: “Builders Not Blockers”

The Government has set a bold target of building **1.5 million homes by 2029**, with councils expected to contribute to a new annual quota of **370,000 homes**. Prime Minister Keir Starmer highlighted the urgent need for reform, stating:

> *“For far too long, working people graft hard but are denied the security of owning their own home… Our Plan for Change will overhaul the broken planning system and deliver the homes and growth this country desperately needs.”*

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner added:

> *“We must all do our bit to tackle the housing crisis. Local councils must adopt plans to meet housing needs, ensuring homes are built alongside the necessary public services and green spaces.”*

Key measures in the updated NPPF include:

- **Mandatory housing targets** for all councils, with increased expectations in high-growth areas.
- A “brownfield-first” approach to prioritise development on previously used land, followed by “grey belt” areas of lower-quality greenbelt land.
- Developers required to meet strict “golden rules” for infrastructure, including affordable housing, GP surgeries, and transport.

Boosting Council Resources

To support these changes, councils will receive an additional **£100 million** in funding and **300 more planning officers** to expedite decisions. The Government is also exploring “brownfield passports” to fast-track urban developments and offering local authorities the option to increase planning fees.

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Local Impact and Next Steps

The **Regulation 19 Consultation** represents the final chance for residents to provide input before the plan is examined by an independent inspector.

To participate in the consultation or register for updates, visit **epsom-ewell.inconsult.uk**.

With the new planning framework demanding rapid progress, councils across the country face the challenge of balancing ambitious housing targets with preserving the character of their communities. Epsom & Ewell's ability to meet these demands will serve as a critical test of the Government's commitment to delivering for "hardworking families" while addressing the nation's housing crisis.

Related reports and letters:

Can the green light to Epsom's Green Belt housing turn red?

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

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

Epsom Chamber Choir Christmas concert benefits hospital

17 December 2024



Epsom Chamber Choir was delighted to welcome The Worshipful The Mayor of Epsom and Ewell, Councillor **Steve Bridger**, and the Mayoress, Mrs. Carol Bridger, to their annual Christmas concert at St Martin's Church on Saturday, 14th December.

Starting at a family-friendly 6 pm and lasting just an hour, the choir's programme, devised by conductor **Jack Apperley**, packed in all the elements expected at this time of the year. Inevitably, there was some Rutter – his arrangement of the Sans Day Carol – and audience carols including *O come, all ye faithful* with the Willcocks descant. The choir also sang newer music chosen to feature women composers, including Kerensa Briggs' increasingly well-known *A tender shoot*.

Ralph Vaughan Williams, a composer closely associated with our local area, was represented by his popular *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, based on folk tunes, with soloists from the choir.

The concert closed with a group of lighter items, including a long-time choir favourite, Peter Gritton's close-harmony version of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* and a jazzy arrangement of *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

The Epsom and St Helier Hospitals Charity supports patients, their families, and staff at our local hospitals. We were pleased to offer them the opportunity to take a retiring collection after the concert which raised £413.94

Roger Miller

Image: Jack Apperley with Molly Simpson from the hospital charity with the Mayor and Mayoress of Epsom and Ewell

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Plant-based meat alternatives might be depressing

17 December 2024



There is mounting evidence suggesting that ultra-processed foods (UPF) are bad for our health, but if you stick to a

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vegetarian diet, is that still the case? Plant-based meat alternatives (PBMA) are considered to be ultra-processed foods and may be associated with similar harms.

In the first study of its kind, published in Food Frontiers, researchers from the University of Surrey found that vegetarians who consumed PBMAs had a 42% increased risk of depression compared to vegetarians who refrained from PBMAs.

The study analysed data from the UK Biobank and found no notable differences in intake of sodium, free sugar, total sugar, or saturated fatty acids between those vegetarians who ate PBMA and those who did not.

The researchers did find, however, that those who eat PBMAs had higher blood pressure and C-reactive protein (CRP) levels, a marker of inflammation, and lower levels of apolipoprotein A, a protein associated with HDL, a "good" cholesterol; PBMA consumption was, however, also linked to a reduced risk of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) by 40%.

Professor Nophar Geifman, from the School of Health Sciences at the University of Surrey and senior author of the study, said:

"The overall findings are reassuring, suggesting that plant-based meat alternatives may be a safe option when they are part of an overall balanced diet. However, the potential link between these types of food, inflammation and depression warrants further investigation."

The study presented some limitations due to the data collected, which was predominantly from a white population in the UK, and dietary information only being gathered at the beginning of the study, not accounting for potential changes over time.

Professor Anthony Whetton, co-author of the study from the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Surrey, said:

"Ultra-processed plant-based meat alternatives can be a useful way for people to transition to a vegetarian diet effectively, and that helps with sustainable agricultural practices. Further research, including longitudinal studies and trials with more diverse populations, is necessary to confirm these findings and the relationship between vegetarian foods and mood."

Epsom and Ewell's solar powered spaceship

17 December 2024



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has recently installed solar panels on the roof of Bourne Hall, and secured funding from the Public Sector Low Carbon Skills Fund to develop a heat decarbonisation plan for the Ewell Village community venue. These works are part of a planned programme of measures to decarbonise Bourne Hall.

This is part of the council's Climate Change Action Plan which has set an ambitious target for the council to be carbon neutral by 2035.

Bourne Hall uses the most energy out of all the council's buildings. The 52.2 kWp solar panel system will generate 45,000 kWh of electricity, covering 25% of Bourne Hall's electricity usage, and saving more than 9 tonnes of carbon each year. The panels will save Bourne Hall around £15,000 annually in costs which can then be invested back into services for the community.

The Low Carbon Skills Fund is run by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and is delivered by Salix.

Funding for the heat decarbonisation plan will enable the council to develop a detailed understanding of the different ways in which energy efficiency of this building can be improved, including decarbonising the heating system.

Windows are also scheduled to be replaced with double glazing next year, part funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Bourne Hall is a Grade II listed building, situated in the heart of the historic Ewell Village with Hogsmill River running nearby. Set in a picturesque setting, Bourne Hall has function rooms, facilities and services that the public and businesses can hire including an exhibition space. It also hosts Bourne Hall Museum, and Ewell Library which is run by Surrey County Council.

Councillor Liz Frost, Chair of the Environment Committee said: "We are passionate about our Climate Change Action Plan and take our responsibilities seriously. Changes and initiatives over the last four years has seen the council's operational carbon footprint reduce by 14% since the council first began to measure it in 2019.

"Bourne Hall is an important hub for our community, and the installation of solar panels and the development of a robust heat decarbonisation plan is just part of a series of works that will make this picturesque and historical landmark more

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sustainable for future generations and help continue Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's drive to be carbon neutral by 2035."

Programme manager at Salix Christopher Masters said: "We are delighted to support Epsom & Ewell Borough Council in its net zero journey. Having a robust heat decarbonisation plan is a very important step in this process.

"We are looking forward to seeing what the plan will come up with and how the council will move forward as it continues to meet the ambitious net zero challenges."

More information about Climate Change Action Plan progress can be found here – Climate Change | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (epsom-ewell.gov.uk)

Can the green light to Epsom's Green Belt housing turn red?

17 December 2024



Letters to the Editor

From Tim Murphy of the Surrey Campaign to Protect Rural England

A Dark Day for Epsom and Ewell

Dear Editor,

I write with deep disappointment and dismay at the decision by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) to approve a draft Local Plan that sacrifices Green Belt land in our borough for housing development. This decision marks a dark day for Epsom & Ewell and represents a significant betrayal of the community's trust and values.

On December 10, EEBC councillors voted by 16 to 8, with 7 abstentions, to approve the latest draft Local Plan, which proposes releasing large areas of our much-valued Green Belt. Planning officers claim councillors had no choice due to Government housing targets. However, this argument does not excuse the council's willingness to surrender cherished green spaces. The community clearly recognizes the value of protecting our countryside, even if the council does not.

Public opposition to the loss of Green Belt land has been overwhelming. During last year's consultation, more than 1,500 residents responded, with 87% opposing any Green Belt development. A petition against the loss of Green Belt land attracted an astonishing 11,000 signatures, and a subsequent petition was so strongly supported that councillors were forced to debate it at the December meeting. The message from residents is clear: we do not want our Green Belt sacrificed for development.

It is worth emphasizing that the council's own Green Belt study concluded that the vast majority of the borough's Green Belt is performing its intended function. This includes Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena—two areas now designated for housing—which were identified as "highly performing" under the Government's own criteria. Why, then, is the council choosing to give up such valuable land?

Protecting our Green Belt is about more than preserving open spaces. It is essential for public health, biodiversity, climate change mitigation, and preventing urban sprawl. Epsom & Ewell has largely resisted London's sprawl, maintaining its identity as Surrey's smallest district. Its open spaces are limited to either municipal parks or the Green Belt, yet these are now at risk. Over the past 25 years, the borough has already absorbed significant population growth through large housing developments on former hospital sites.

The council's reliance on private developers to address local housing needs is deeply flawed. Private housebuilders often fail to deliver affordable homes, using "viability assessments" to argue that profits would be insufficient if they included the required number of affordable units. For example, a recently approved development on Green Belt land in this borough includes no affordable housing at all.

If EEBC were serious about tackling local housing needs, it would prioritise socially rented housing by working with central government and housing associations to develop urban brownfield sites and town-centre locations. Instead, the council appears intimidated by unrealistic housing targets set by Whitehall and has chosen to offer up our Green Belt as an easy sacrifice. This raises serious questions about local democracy and accountability.

The council's decision disregards the wishes of the community it is supposed to serve. It is vital that we continue to challenge this plan and advocate for a future where Epsom & Ewell's Green Belt is valued and protected for generations to come.

Yours faithfully,

Tim Murphy, Trustee Surrey Campaign to Protect Rural England

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From Katherine Alexander of The Epsom Green Belt Group

Dear Editor,

The ink is barely dry on Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's signing off on the draft Local Plan when it has been rendered obsolete.

The Epsom Green Belt Group warned the council that failing to accelerate the Local Plan process would result in disaster for the borough, and that disaster has now arrived.

The Local Plan will now be caught by the revised National Planning Policy Framework issued today by the government.

Prior to today, the council had the option not to review Green Belt boundaries and not to argue for exceptional circumstances to build on the Green Belt. It chose not to do either, but instead to revise Green Belt boundaries to permit development. Seven and a half years of delays have led us to this point.

The government has focussed its headlines on building on the 'greybelt' to make their plans sound palatable. However, the 'greybelt' definition is a smokescreen for much broader development that they want to portray. This is for two reasons:

1. All Green Belt qualifies as 'greybelt' except:

- Strips of land at the edge of a borough that separate it from built-up sections of neighbouring boroughs.
- Land that 'strongly contributes' to 'checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.'

In Epsom & Ewell, 22 of the 53 parcels of Green Belt land in the council's analysis fail to meet either of these criteria and would therefore be classed as greybelt under the new definition. No disused petrol stations to be seen anywhere.

One of the parcels that would remain Green Belt, not greybelt, under this definition is Horton Farm. However, the council has voluntarily included it in the plan.

2. The NPPF states that where there is insufficient greybelt land to meet the new housing target, councils must find enough Green Belt land to make up the difference (para 148).
The only hint of protection is if that Green Belt land need not be released if it 'would fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt when considered across the area of the plan.' There is no guidance available as to what that means in practice, but as Epsom Common and Horton Country Park will remain, this exception is unlikely to help either.

What then is the new housing target for Epsom?
889 dwellings per year. That is almost five times the historical house building rate in the borough (c.189 per year) and more than three times the rate in the proposed Local Plan (c.273 per year).

Every scrap of available land will need to be included in the plan, and even then it won't be enough to get close to the target.

The council only has itself to blame. It has failed to protect the borough, and the government has made it so the price for that failure is astronomically high.

After over 7.5 years of delays, the council's task now is to work quickly—hitherto anathema to them—to review the NPPF in detail and work out whether any of the Green Belt can be saved under the new rules. This may mean taking out land that it had already included, because there is an argument to protect it (such as Horton Farm) in order to mitigate and minimize the disastrous impacts for the borough.

The previous excuse for progressing with an unpopular plan was to protect the borough from speculative development. Because of their delays, there will be no land left for speculative development. Perhaps they've got their wish.

Yours faithfully,

Katherine Alexander

From Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Epsom & Ewell Proposed Submission Local Plan (Regulation 19) Consultation to go ahead as soon as possible

10th December Councillors voted to approve the Epsom & Ewell Proposed Submission Local Plan (2022-2040) and that the Regulation 19 Consultation should take place at the earliest opportunity. The Regulation 19 Consultation is the final opportunity for residents to feedback on the plan before it is submitted for independent examination next summer.

At the meeting of Full Council, Councillors heard from a petitioner who requested that all green belt land should be removed from the Proposed Submission Local Plan except for previously developed land. This was debated by Councillors during the meeting, before the vote.

Commenting after the meeting, Councillor Peter O'Donovan, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy, said "The Proposed Submission Local Plan provides a vision for our borough that strikes a balance between providing much needed homes including affordable housing, infrastructure, and support for local businesses whilst ensuring enhanced protection for biodiversity and our borough's green spaces, and protecting the valuable local heritage and character of our borough's towns and villages.

"It is challenging to find a path that meets the many different needs of all our communities, and not everyone may agree

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with every aspect of this plan. However, having listened to all the feedback, and examined the comprehensive evidence base, we feel strongly that this plan ensures that everyone in our borough, both now and in the future, is given the chance to thrive in Epsom & Ewell.

The Regulation 19 Consultation will take place at the earliest opportunity. We will announce the dates on our website and on social media as soon as they are confirmed."

An up-to-date Local Plan protects the borough from ad hoc and inappropriate development and ensures responsibility for future planning decisions remains with the borough and its communities. It provides a framework for where in the borough new development should go and where should be protected.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council consulted on the Draft Local Plan in February and March 2023. The comments received on the Draft Local Plan, along with the local evidence base, informed the Proposed Submission Local Plan. The Regulation 18 consultation feedback summary report, which shows how the council has taken account of the feedback received, can be found here: Consultation response statement

During the Regulation 19 Consultation residents, visitors and local businesses can comment on whether the plan is legally compliant and sound, in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework. Guidance on how to respond will be published on the council's website.

Responses collected as part of the consultation will be sent to the Planning Inspectorate with the Proposed Submission Local Plan and the evidence base documents.

Dear Editor

As someone involved in the Save Epsom Green Belt campaign I just cannot contain my disbelief and anger at the local Council.

Last week the majority of them went ahead with a policy to build on our wonderful and well used recreational green spaces doubtless under some 'exceptional circumstances' clause.

Obviously, as already said many times and with recent letters to you, it is nevertheless worth reminding all your readers of the true devastating significance of this decision.

It is a Residents' Association Majority Council. They are supposed to represent the local residents: the clue is in the name! They have not and should be ashamed at letting us down despite the many efforts to stop this. I understand that Epsom is the smallest Surrey Borough yet the most populated for its size. As many of us know, the present infrastructure is overloaded: schools, the hospital, GP surgeries, roads viz. Ruxley Lane in rush hours!

This building programme will further exacerbate the problem and severely restrict the country wide environment and its diverse wildlife. No doubt developers are already rubbing their hands with due opportunism as, thanks to the Residents' Association Group, the local Green Belt vanishes FOR EVER! YES, WITH NO COMING BACK.

Yours Faithfully,

Dr Ted Bailey

West Ewell

From Epsom and Ewell MP Helen Maguire

Dear Editor,

Housing in Epsom and Ewell: A Call for Community-Led Solutions

I write to express my deep concern over the Government's recently announced planning framework, which enables developers to bypass locally elected councillors and pressures councils to review precious green belt land for development. For communities like ours in Epsom and Ewell, this approach represents yet another example of Whitehall ignoring the voices of local people who are best placed to decide what their area needs.

Housing is a pressing issue, but the solutions must be community-led. The homes we build here must be genuinely affordable and accompanied by the services that people rely on—GP surgeries, schools, and reliable public transport. It is equally important that we protect the green spaces that define our borough.

Vulnerable families in Epsom and Ewell need safe and warm homes, but this cannot be achieved by sidelining the community. When residents are engaged and empowered, we can deliver the homes required to support those living in temporary accommodation, help older residents access housing solutions tailored to their needs, and ensure the next generation has somewhere to call home.

Unfortunately, the Government's announcement fails to address the root causes of Britain's housing crisis. The biggest issue is a desperate lack of social housing. Too often, developers use legal loopholes to shirk their obligations to build affordable homes. Meanwhile, the very term "affordable" has become meaningless to many local families who are priced out of the market. We need clearer definitions and upfront solutions to ensure that affordability is not just a slogan but a reality.

The recent decision by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council to move forward with the Local Plan, including controversial Green Belt sites, highlights the challenge we face. While I welcome the council's efforts to prepare a plan, I share the concerns of many local residents and Liberal Democrat councillors who feel that housing targets and the development of virgin Green Belt land, such as Horton Farm, are not the right path forward.

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The ruling Residents Association has been slow to update the borough's planning policies, leaving us vulnerable to inappropriate and opportunistic applications. It is time for all parties to work together to prioritise robust, community-supported plans that deliver for Epsom and Ewell.

Epsom and Ewell deserve housing solutions that respect our unique character, address the needs of vulnerable residents, and safeguard our green spaces for future generations. I will continue to stand with our community in advocating for planning policies that reflect these priorities.

Yours faithfully,

Helen Maguire MP
Member of Parliament for Epsom and Ewell

Epsom led crime gang banged up

17 December 2024



An organised crime group who carried out multiple burglaries, a vicious assault, and stole more than £215,000 worth of high-value cars have been jailed for a total of twenty seven and a half years.

In 2023, police identified a series of residential burglaries which could be linked via a distinctive Audi A8, which was one of just fifteen in the country. The Audi was then seen at a petrol station with a wonky number plate which didn't match its genuine details.

Soon after, a second car suspected of being linked to the series was identified by a distinctive GB sticker on the back. However, the challenge remained to identify the people involved and a complex investigation began which used a variety of tactics to uncover the full extent of their crimes.

Between June and August 2023, members of the group burgled multiple homes and were also linked to other offences including keyless car theft, where vehicles were taken close to the owners' house or from the front drive. Areas targeted included Epsom and Walton-On-Thames in Surrey and Croydon, Chessington, New Malden, Raynes Park and Surbiton in the Metropolitan area.

They would scope out a target vehicle, and either commit a burglary to steal the keys or use illegal devices to gain keyless entry. They would then drive the vehicle away and park it elsewhere for a short time to see if any tracking devices had been activated.

In the meantime, they would identify similar vehicles which were insured, source illegal fake number plates, and fit them to the stolen vehicles to try and evade detection. On some occasions the stolen cars would ultimately end up at 'chop shops', where they were broken up into parts and sold for profit.

During the burglaries at both residential properties and some shops, they caused thousands of pounds worth of damage and on one occasion, three of the men (Harry Mackay, Rico Persechino and Jason Connors) – assaulted the occupier of an address with weapons.

After gathering a body of evidence, on 29 August 2023 police proactively apprehended Rico Persechino and Harry Mackay outside a shop in East Grinstead. Mackay tried to escape by running inside and heading to the staff door but he was swiftly caught. Officers later found a keyless car theft device that he'd tried to discard inside the shop.

The police investigation used a variety of tactics including identifying cloned number plates, tracking vehicles through ANPR (automatic number plate recognition) and matching the suspects' descriptions and clothing to CCTV footage. Often when committing a burglary at a shop, the group brought a large white carrier bag to carry the stolen goods and a comparison of CCTV footage enabled officers to tie offences to them due to the appearance of this same bag each time.

One victim of the group's criminal activities said "The burglary was very distressing for both my partner and myself, and we felt a significant impact after the unwelcome intrusion from these criminals. I was very angry and upset and when I met with detectives the following day, I was close to tears and that's not in my nature. The thought of strangers going through your personal possessions, and the damage they caused to gain access to my property was scary. My partner lost family jewellery that had been passed down through generations. After the robbery I said I wanted to move, and I still might as this has had a long-term effect on me. I'm pleased to see the sentence this group were handed, and I was very impressed with the brilliant work of the police officers and detectives dealing with this case, they gave me faith throughout."

Lead investigator, Detective Inspector Daniel Voller, shared: "This was a sophisticated and organised operation and

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exposing the full extent of their crimes was only possible thanks to the hard work and diligence of everyone involved, from detectives to intelligence teams.

These thieves had no regard for anyone but themselves and escalated their offending from stealing cars outside homes to breaking inside and committing a serious assault. We have worked relentlessly over many months to prepare a strong case against them and I'm pleased our efforts have resulted in getting them behind bars."

Following a trial at Guildford Crown Court on Monday 9 December, brothers Harry, Frankie and Stevey MacKay appeared along with Jason Connors and Rico Persechino for sentencing.

- Harry Mackay, 34 (DOB 27/04/1990), from Epsom pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Steal Motor Vehicles, Conspiracy to Burgle and Conspiracy to Commit Robbery and was sentenced to 8 years.
- Frankie Mackay, 35 (DOB 24/05/1989), from Epsom, pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Steal Motor Vehicles and was sentenced to 39 months.
- Stevey Mackay, 32 (DOB 08/02/1992), from Kingston-Upon-Thames pleaded guilty to Steal Motor Vehicles and was sentenced to 39 months
- Jason Connors, 29 (DOB 25/08/1995) from Croydon pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Robbery and was sentenced to 5 years and 4 months
- Rico Persechino, 35 (DOB 01/04/1989) from Kingston-Upon-Thames pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Steal Motor Vehicles, Conspiracy to Burgle and Conspiracy to Commit Robbery and was sentenced to 7.5 years

Custody photos of Epsom brothers Harry and Frankie Mackay

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

17 December 2024



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

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

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

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

Domestic Challenges and Veterans' Welfare

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

The debate touched on the impact of explosive weapons on civilians and veterans alike. Ms Maguire called for sustained government support for injured veterans, including those with prosthetic limbs. Referring to pioneering research at

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institutions like Imperial College London, she advocated for better resources and protective equipment, particularly for female deminers.

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

The Global Context

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

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

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

Building Awareness and Collaboration

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

Government Minister's response:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related report (Westminster Debate)

Grayling's fishy business

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Woking child murder lessons for Surrey's agencies

17 December 2024



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We can have no more reviews, no more strategies, no more debate. When we say ‘never again’, we have to mean it – let that be Sara’s legacy.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

17 December 2024



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

Presentation of the Petition

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

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land:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Council Debate

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Final Debate on the Draft Local Plan

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clive Woodbridge defended the plan as a balanced approach:

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

Outcome of the Vote

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

Councillors Who Voted FOR:

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

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Councillors Who Voted AGAINST:

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

Councillors Who ABSTAINED:

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

Procedural criticisms and more:

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

In their press release, the Group stated:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surrey first in image AI

17 December 2024



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professor SonG added:

“With NitroFusion, we’re not just releasing another image generation model – we’re pioneering an entirely new approach which democratises AI interaction.

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

This breakthrough delivers multiple leaps for the users and industry:

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

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

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

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

The technology is available immediately through https://chendaryen.github.io/NitroFusion.github.io/, with comprehensive

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documentation and community support resources.

Surrey: Free school buses withdrawn

17 December 2024



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Surrey school kids’ country walk saving money

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

Epsom Symphony Orchestra: A Cornerstone of Local Musical Excellence

17 December 2024



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

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

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

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

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

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

Related report:

Spanish fiesta came to Epsom

Rugby result reads well for Sutton & Epsom

17 December 2024

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

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

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

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

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

The second half began to recall striking parallels with the final fixture of last season. Formidable attacking waves crashing against adamantine defences. The hosts besieged the visitor's 22. The game was set on an endless loop with Sisyphus and Tantalus starring for Sutton and Horatio playing the lead for Reeds. The Black & Whites seemed bereft of the traditional timber equine solution. Recent clinical efficiency in their opponent's 22 was replaced by frustration against an impenetrable defence. The elements added a slightly comical note as the wind hampered clearance kicks of sufficient distance. However, the Reeds solution of running a penalty 5 metres from their line and kicking to their wing was hardly a prosaic solution. It might require some training ground practice or only play that card on a still afternoon. The ball ended up being caught by Sutton as it descended near the Reeds' line in the corner.

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

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

Trailing 11-17 Reeds threw everything at Sutton who did not help themselves by conceding numerous penalties. As inevitably as a game of amateur darts finishes with multiple efforts at double one this match was to conclude 5 metres

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from the Black & White line. Reeds resorted to their most powerful ball carriers to smash their way over. Sutton were equal to the task with a collective will and tremendous tackling. Finally, the defence employed the 'Irish Kiss' and prevented the Reeds man getting to the deck. Mr Carter awarded S&E the scrum and blew the final whistle to end a titanic struggle with Sutton & Epsom worthy winners by 17-11.

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

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

Sutton & Epsom
O'Brien, Symonds, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.
Replacements: Boaden, Rea & Hilton.

Reeds Weybridge
Clark M, Brown, Maitland, Clark J, Endeley, Jesty, Palmer, Day L, Day R, Beavis, Goodwin, Finn ©, Ewington, Wasko & Wastie.
Replacements: Howe, Tyndale & Homfrey.

A dog's dinner of a licensing scheme?

17 December 2024



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

Dog walkers may have to pay £360 a year to roam over the Surrey Hills from April 1, 2O25. Banstead Common Conservators (BCC), which manage the four sites, said its main reason for setting up the scheme was for safety. The sites include Banstead Heath, Banstead Downs, Park Downs and Burgh Heath.

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

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

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

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

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

They added that BCC has received no complaints relating to the behaviour of our staff from professional dog walkers and

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noted BCC staff will be issued with body worn cameras for their safety in future.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The council announced last week that it is reviewing the dog walking limit after a petition calling out the "heavy-handed" nature of the approach. An RBBC spokesperson said: "Only the Council's enforcement team can enforce our PSPOs. Our enforcement does not extend to the BCC's own licensing scheme. We will be requesting further information from BCC regarding the operation of their licensing scheme."

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

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Ideas for empty Council premises in Reigate and Redhill

17 December 2024



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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