

Another Surrey borough going under?

13 July 2023



Guildford Borough Council will bring in “strict controls” on new spending and aim to get its finances in order with a special budget to be set this month.

The authority has admitted it may need to consider the issuing of a section 114 notice, effectively declaring itself bankrupt, ahead of a full council meeting in October.

But relying on its reserves should in the meantime avoid having to issue the notice – a move which nearby Woking pursued last month due to a forecasted £2.6billion debt and a £1.2bn deficit.

A dedicated financial task force will be established as Guildford Borough Council admitted it finds itself in a “very difficult financial position”.

The Guildford Lib Dems, which won control of the council in May’s elections, said rising interest rates and accounting issues unearthed by a review of council finances had contributed to the situation.

A special meeting of the authority’s corporate governance and standards committee will outline the plans on Tuesday, July 18. The special budget, which should be brought to full council on July 25, will aim to get the council’s finances in order and will include “strict controls on all new spending, and in-year reductions in spending”.

‘Our residents will always be our highest priority’. The Guildford Lib Dems said the highest priority would be to protect public services. They added: “Above all, we will not shy away from making the tough decisions to make sure residents are protected from cuts to core services. Our residents will always be our highest priority, and we will be honest and realistic about the choices that need to be made to keep the council financially stable.”

The council’s leader, Cllr **Julia McShane** (Lib Dem, Westborough) said though she knew the report was “a difficult read” she said the council wanted to be open and transparent about the challenges ahead. She said: “We have issued a report today related to our finances. I am aware our residents may find this worrying. I want to reassure you that we are taking this situation very seriously. I take comfort in the fact that officers and councillors are working hard to tackle the situation head on.”

Guildford’s former leader, Cllr **Joss Bigmore** (Residents for Guildford and Villages, Merrow) said the budget was delivering on what the previous administration had started at the end of the last financial year. He said the council was “nowhere near” the situation of nearby Woking, which in June issued a section 114 notice. But he said a full review of the finances had shown some errors in the accounts. Cllr Bigmore added: “That’s made the situation even more urgent.”

With overall debt of around £300 million, expected to rise further, council documents show the authority can balance its 2023/24 general fund budget, using reserves if necessary, which should avoid the issuing of a section 114 notice in the current financial year.

The former leader, who was in charge for two years as part of an arrangement with the then residents and Lib Dem coalition, said: “Our balance sheet is very solvent. It’s just a matter of managing cash flow, to manage the interest payments. With strong leadership and decisive decision making, it should be no problem.”

He said he “hoped” the current administration could show the leadership and decision making needed. Cllr Bigmore told the LDRS: “I hope they do, for the sake of every resident in Guildford. I think across the chamber, all the group leaders met with the chief executive, the leader and the lead officers for finance and everyone is behind helping.”

He agreed the administration would have to make some “difficult decisions” about services, which could be unpopular with residents. “But they need to make them, otherwise they will be issuing a section 114,” he said.

The Lib Dems pointed to previous Conservative administrations carrying out “high levels of borrowing”, as well as central government issues including rapid rises in interest rates after the budget put out by former Prime Minister **Liz Truss** and **Kwasi Kwarteng**, and a delay to council account auditing.

The council said spending controls would be brought in, immediately limiting all new spending, a review of major projects and borrowing would be carried out and the council would look at selling council assets.

Plans also include “expanding and strengthening” the council’s finances team and continuing the collaboration with Waverley Borough Council to reduce costs.

The Conservative group leader on the council, Cllr **Philip Brooker** (Worplesdon) said he had not yet seen the papers for Tuesday’s meeting, but said he thought one area the council could look at tackling was the “significant amount” spent on consultancy fees. Of the budget situation as a whole he said: “It’s extremely concerning at the moment.”

The corporate governance and standards committee will take place at 7pm on Tuesday, July 18, at the council’s Millmead

offices.

Gatwick to get 2nd runway?

13 July 2023



Gatwick Airport's bid to double its capacity to 78 million passengers and effectively create a second Heathrow will cause a "bigger impact locally than Horse Hill" oil drilling, a local councillor has claimed.

The international airport submitted plans to the Planning Inspectorate last week (July 6) for a second runway, in which its CEO Stewart Wingate said the proposal is vital to its the long-term future and economic prosperity.

Opponents in Surrey impacted by the plan say airports cannot be expanded at the same time as trying to hit net zero carbon emission targets – and campaigners have so far raised more than £5,000 to launch a fight against the airport through the courts.

Jonathan Essex, Surrey County Councillor (Redhill East, Green Party) urged inspectors to listen to the Government's climate scientists and told the LDRS: "This is a big deal. This blows Horse Hill out of the ground and it will make a bigger impact locally. This expansion will mean 100,000 extra flights and a million tonnes of extra carbon. If you accept you need to deal with climate change and we need to do it now, you need to stop expanding airports."

The existing northern runway is mostly used as a taxiway and the application proposes repositioning it 12 metres north to allow dual runway operations – like Heathrow.

According to Gatwick's website, operating as a two-runway airport would "unlock new capacity and allow for a more efficient and resilient operation. If approved the £2.2 billion privately financed plan would be one of the largest capital investment projects in the region for decades. And it would help the airport meet future passenger demand by serving around 75 million passengers a year by the late 2030s."

Gatwick Airport currently serves 32.8million passengers. Heathrow is used by between 70 and 78 million people.

Sally Pavey, chairperson of the Communities Against Gatwick Noise Emissions group said it is crowdfunding for a long legal battle as they didn't believe planners would reject the application. "This benefits Gatwick, there are very few for the local communities. Gatwick is saying it will bring jobs and economic benefits but aviation and low-cost airlines are going towards automation. The jobs are decreasing.

"People really need to wake up to the fact that this is a second runway through the back door. It really slaps in the face of what we are all trying to do which is to cut our carbon footprints."

According to the airport an expanded airport would 'boost' the region's economy by £1billion and generate 14,000 new jobs.

The proposals also feature infrastructure work to improve the main access routes to the airport, but campaigners said the wider impact on the smaller roads would be huge.

Gatwick Airport chief **Mr Wingate** said: "The northern runway plan will help secure the long-term future of the airport and economic prosperity for thousands of families, businesses, and future generations across the region. If approved, our plan will also improve airport resilience, meet future passenger demand, and increase competition in the London airport market, by providing vital new international connections to support 'Global Britain'.

"The consultation and engagement activity over the past two years has been hugely valuable in shaping our plans to ensure they best meet the needs and requirements of local people, as well as our airlines, passengers and other stakeholders. We are confident that our plans are both economically and environmentally robust."

Applications of national importance are dealt with by planning inspectors and signed off by the relevant government departments. Construction could start in 2025 and be ready for operational use by the end of the decade, the airport said.

Image: Mike McBey – Gatwick Airport CC BY 2.0

Doctors' strike: advice

13 July 2023



A wave of back-to-back strikes will severely impact hospital services over the coming week – and will follow the busiest month of 2023 for one hospital group.

St George's, Epsom and St Helier hospitals have faced significant pressure in recent weeks, with emergency attendances in June ramping up. Last month about 880 people visited one of the Group's three emergency departments (EDs) daily – about 10% more than is usual.

The emergency departments also saw extraordinary demand some days – including one record-breaking Monday when they had their busiest day ever. Now, ahead of this week's junior doctors' strikes, which get underway at 7 am on Thursday and continue until 7 am the following Tuesday (18 July), members of the public have been warned to expect disruption and longer waits, and to avoid visiting the ED when it's not an emergency.

There will also be an additional challenge when hospital consultants go on strike just days after the junior doctors' action ends. That walk-out is due to take place on Thursday 20 July and Friday 21 July.

Dr Richard Jennings, Group Chief Medical Officer for St George's, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group, said: "June was very busy and that's also continued into July – which makes it more difficult when we're trying to prepare for the inevitable challenges strike action brings. Ahead of each round of strikes I've urged the public to take steps to help us and to come to our EDs in an emergency only – and I am making the same request again now when it is more important than ever. We have a very tough week ahead and we need your support to ensure we can prioritise care for our sickest and most seriously ill patients."

The hospital group recognise that it's going to be the first time this year that a junior doctors' strike has taken place over the weekend and into a Monday. This has prompted further concern, as Monday is normally the busiest day of the week in the Group's EDs. This was even more pronounced last month, with 1,000-plus average daily attendances on Mondays – significantly higher than a typical day of 800.

Dr Jennings added: "If people need medical help – during the strikes or at any other time – we would encourage them to contact NHS 111 online for 24/7 advice on where to go and what to do if they have an illness or injury. When it's a real emergency or life-threatening, of course, people should always call 999 or go to an emergency department."

Strikes will also impact other services at the hospitals, and will mean that some appointments, procedures and operations may be postponed to ensure emergency care can be prioritised. Patients will be contacted directly if their appointments are rescheduled, and should continue to come forward for care as normal unless they hear otherwise.

NHS 111 online should always be the first port of call when you have a health need that's not an emergency, as it will direct you to the best place to get help for your symptoms.

Pharmacies, meanwhile, can offer advice and over-the-counter medicines for a range of minor illnesses, such as coughs, colds, sore throats, and aches and pains. Some pharmacies will be open at weekends, and you can find your nearest one here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/pharmacy/find-a-pharmacy>

In a life-threatening emergency, you should always call 999 or go to an emergency department.

If you need mental health support in a crisis, and live in Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton or Wandsworth you can call South West London's 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Line on 0800 028 8000. There's more information about this service here:

<https://www.swlstg.nhs.uk/patients-carers/crisis-support/mental-health-support-line>

For adults, young people, and children in Surrey and North East Hampshire, 24-hour support is available by calling: 0800 915 4644. There's more information here:

<https://www.sabp.nhs.uk/our-services>

St George's, Epsom and St Helier hospitals press.

Epsom medics sky-dive for babies

13 July 2023



A team of obstetricians, gynaecologists, neonatologists and nurses who work at **Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust** have raised nearly £10,000 for **Bliss**, the UK's leading charity for babies born premature or sick.

Radhika Viswanatha, Nina Underwood, Ramesh Ganapathy, Demetri Panayi, Salim Yasin, Charlotte Pearce, Vicky Minns, Cristina Arias-Rey and Sharon Young took part in a skydive on 28 May 2023 at the Old Sarum Park in Salisbury.

1 in every 7 babies born in the UK will need specialist care and the group have a special link to Bliss, as they each look after women and their babies during pregnancy and delivery and beyond at Epsom and St Helier Hospital.

Some of the babies they deliver are more vulnerable than others, so are looked after by the hospital's neonatal team.

Demetri Panayi said: "Our charity skydive was born out of moments of madness, midlife crises and irrational personal desire! But it gave us the opportunity to raise money for a cause close to our hearts, and to our patients."

Donations to their skydive are helping Bliss to drive improvements in neonatal care, to ensure that the needs of babies are at the heart of policy and planning for the future, and to provide information and support to all families with a baby born premature or sick.

Richard Moody, Director of Fundraising at Bliss, said: "We are so grateful for the exceptional fundraising efforts of Demetri and his colleagues. Each donation to Bliss is going towards our mission of helping all babies born premature or sick in the UK have the best chance of survival and quality of life.

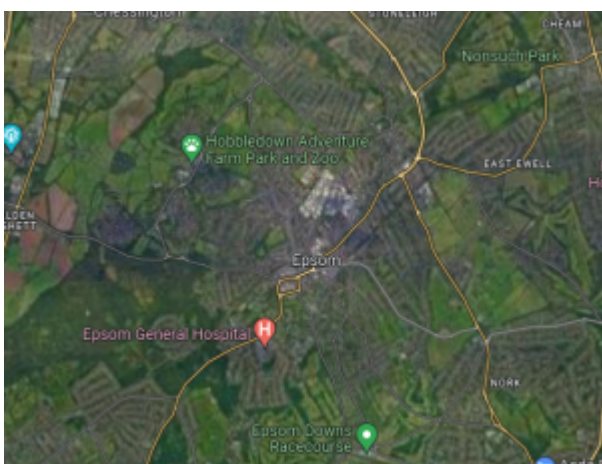
"This is a great example of how a perinatal team can come together to raise awareness and money for Bliss."

You can find more information and donate here: <https://www.justgiving.com/page/skydive2023>

Molly Gorman

We are the greenest?

13 July 2023



Epsom and Ewell is the greenest local authority in the UK, according to most recent data. Industries located in the borough produced 5 kilotons of carbon dioxide per year in 2020, a Utility Bidder report has shown.

The report also showed the most polluting businesses in the UK to be those in the electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply industries which produce almost 81,000 ktCO₂e of greenhouse gas emissions per year. This is followed by the manufacturing and transport and storage industries.

Neath Port Talbot had the most greenhouse gas emissions with 6,356 kt of CO₂. Located in South Wales, it is a key producer of steel and tinplate.

East Renfrewshire had the second lowest emissions with 5.5 ktCO₂e and The Orkney Islands was third with 8 ktCO₂e of greenhouse gas emissions.

The report drew on data from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and the Office for National Statistics. The report does not include data for consumer expenditure.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council say on their website: "Under the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999, certain industries require a permit to operate. This permit contains various conditions in order to minimise the emissions of pollutants to the air. Our Environmental Health service carries out periodic inspections to make sure these industries are compliant with the conditions of their permit."

Surrey's 999 services under one operator?

13 July 2023



A review into Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner taking control of the county's fire and rescue service has been branded "a waste of time" and "unwarranted" by councillors.

The proposals could mean the Surrey Fire and Rescue Service would no longer be under the control of the county council, but councillors questioned the possible move at a time of "considerable change" in the service.

Councillors raised concerns at a meeting of the authority's communities, environment and highways select committee on Wednesday (July 5) that such a change had previously been ruled out, and that the review was a waste of money.

Lisa Townsend told the LDRS she was responding to central government proposals to reform fire and rescue services, and has commissioned an independent review to see if there would be any benefits of a change.

The Conservative PCC said this was not something she had "dreamt up overnight", but claimed the county council had made clear they wanted "no active part" in the work to look into the change.

Councillor **Denise Turner-Stewart**, deputy leader at Surrey County Council and cabinet member for communities and community safety, told the July 5 meeting a previous proposal put forward by former PCC David Munro showed there was "no significant benefit" to a change in governance. She said: "As far as I'm concerned, nothing has really changed since. There are no direct benefits that could be generated by a potential change. There is no mandate for a potential change."

She said the service had been through "considerable change" since an inspection by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services in 2018/19 found it required improvement, and was now in a "steady state".

Cllr **Turner-Stewart** said it would not be "beneficial or advantageous" to look at further changes for the service, and called the PCC's review "unwarranted and not legitimate".

Mrs Townsend said she had written to all MPs and to the county council's leader outlining the work she planned to undertake and the reasons behind it. She added: "This is government policy which I have been encouraged to consider. So I believe establishing an up-to-date understanding of the picture of fire and rescue governance in Surrey is an entirely prudent and legitimate exercise for me to carry out in the circumstances.

"I want to be clear that at this stage, this is purely a review. Any proposal to take on responsibility for the governance of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service would require the preparation of a full business case. This would be subject to extensive consultation prior to being submitted to the Home Office for any approval."

Cllr **Keith Witham** (Conservative, Worplesdon) told the meeting he had already made his views on the proposals known to the PCC. Saying he knew how much hard work had gone into improving the service in the past five years, Cllr Witham said a change would be "an entirely inappropriate, unnecessary distraction at this time".

He said: "It is a waste of time, a waste of her funds, for she is financing this investigation, and will be a distraction, unnecessarily."

Mrs Townsend said she had "no desire" to distract from progress made in the service but that a government white paper on future legislation was "imminent".

She told the LDRS: "[Government] have been clear they want to simplify and strengthen governance for fire services and if that process is to involve Police and Crime Commissioners, this review will ensure I am properly placed to make an informed decision for the Surrey public."

Esher monument cleaners risk arrest....

13 July 2023



An Esher monument so “grubby” that people want to clean with toothbrushes is an “enigma” as to who owns and is responsible for it.

The **White Lady Milestone** road marker, outside the former Cafe Rouge building on the approach to Esher, has been there since 1767. But the Grade II listed milestone is now looking “very grubby” according to one Elmbridge cabinet member, leading to “regular” emails from people who want to clean it up.

Elmbridge Councillor **Alex Batchelor** told a cabinet meeting on Wednesday (July 5) “it would be great” if anyone could help work out who was supposed to be responsible for the monument. Having had conversations with conservation officers at both Elmbridge Borough Council and Surrey County Council, Cllr Batchelor said as far as he could tell, no one was claiming responsibility for the Portsmouth Road landmark.

The borough council’s leader, Cllr **Bruce McDonald** (Liberal Democrat, Claygate) described it as an “enigma” for the council to ponder. Cllr Batchelor told the meeting: “It is a listed, National Heritage monument and it’s looking very, very grubby indeed. I constantly get [emails from] regular people who would like to show up with their toothbrushes, give it a good go. The only thing I have to promise them is that’s certainly likely to get them arrested.”

The cabinet were discussing the monument as they made the decision to add the former Cafe Rouge building, previously known as the Orleans Arms, to the council’s list of local heritage assets.

The former public house, dating back to 1856, was originally named after the Duke of Orleans, King Louis Philippe of France, who lived at nearby Claremont House.

Council documents show it provides evidence for development of Victorian Esher, and point to its prominent location on the historic route between London and Portsmouth.

As a “good example of Regency style building with continental influences” the building was added to the local list, which can be taken into account during planning applications.

Council documents describe assets on the local list as reinforcing “a sense of place and local distinctiveness” and providing a “tangible connection with our past lives, events, and industries”.

A previous planning application for 28 flats on the site was described by residents as “more suitable for the centre of Basingstoke” and “the ugliest residential housing scheme” that one had ever seen.

Epsom and Ewell High getting fitter

13 July 2023



Lifestyle Fitness and Bourne Education Trust have announced they will be working together to provide the leading sports facilities at **Epsom & Ewell High School** to the local community.

Lifestyle Fitness will begin operations at the site from 1st September. Development of this facility will see Lifestyle Fitness take over management of the existing sports amenities, which include outdoor pitches, tennis courts, a brand-new sports hall, and even a sprinting track, whilst also developing a Lifestyle Fitness gym, studio space, and group fitness classes. This combination of sports facilities, fitness suite and group exercise studios will make the club the perfect hub for fitness and wellbeing for students, teachers, and the community.

“We’re so thrilled to be opening our 25th site and working in partnership with the Academy to provide these facilities to the community” said Lifestyle Fitness Managing Director, **James Lawrence**. “The facility will be the perfect location for the town’s fitness needs, whether it be to play football or tennis outdoors, or to take a group exercise class or get a workout in at the gym.”

The facility, which is situated within Epsom & Ewell High School, forms part of the planned growth and development of both Lifestyle Fitness and the Bourne Education Trust, who currently have a partnership at another school site, located at

The Matthew Arnold School in Staines. Students of all ages will benefit from use of the facility during the school day, with the gym floor and sports facilities opening from 4:30pm for the wider community on weekdays, and 9:30am to 5:00pm on weekends.

“After working with Lifestyle Fitness for many years at The Matthew Arnold School in Staines, I am delighted to welcome them to Epsom & Ewell High School to manage the sports facilities on our behalf.” said **R. Davey**, Bourne Education Trust Sports Director. “I look forward to seeing the benefit this will have on the local community and surrounding areas in the coming months. We have collaborated with numerous schools and educational trusts over the last forty years.”

James continued. “Their positions as vital hubs in the local community that connect students, teachers, parents, and the wider town allow us to do what we do best: create healthier and more active communities, with a focus on well-being. With facilities like these, we can take fitness and wellness to an even wider audience in the local area.”

You can follow lifestylefitness.co.uk/club/epsom for any more information and updates on the club’s progress. Anyone wishing to join the club ahead of its opening can also do so now online, with memberships from as low as £14.99 per month when using the promotional code ‘EARLYBIRD’.

Morgan Kimbel

Brawling Bowling Club reprieved

13 July 2023



The “level of violence and hostility” during a mass brawl inside a Surrey bowling club was unlike anything a serving police officer had ever experienced before, they have claimed.

A fight involving about 30 people erupted at the **Old Dean Bowls Club in Camberley** last April with officers arriving to scenes of people having their eyes gouged, women knocked on conscious, men slumped in corners with life threatening head wounds and shattered glass all over bloodied carpets.

The officers were called out at 10.55pm and could hear “screams, shouts and smashing glasses coming from the building”. The details came from Surrey Police officer witness statements read as part of a Tuesday, July 5, Surrey Heath Borough Council licensing sub committee review into the club.

One said that as they got out of their cars they saw “around five people have been running from the building or sat down nearby crying or with injuries. A woman has been holding another female up partially as I have walked towards the door, she has shouted ‘you need to go in there now’.

“A male has said something similar next to another female in a vehicle shouting ‘don’t go, you’ll be lambs to the slaughter’.” The officer added: “The level of violence and hostility upon entry was something I have never experienced before.”

Another officer said they were warned by a female who “genuinely seemed concerned” they would be vastly outnumbered, that it was “f*g carnage in there”.

The sub-committee had already seen a lengthy clip of CCTV footage of what the police called an “utterly disgraceful scene”. The committee was hearing evidence brought by **Surrey Police** recommending the club lost its licence. Others argued it should be give a reprieve as it played an important role in the community - particularly as a bowls club but also in more wider terms.

Trefor Hogg, Surrey County Councillor for Camberley East said at the meeting revenue concerns pushed the club to host more events and that without the bar takings the club would find it difficult to remain open. He said the club, the town’s only secular meeting place, played a critical role in the community - which he described as an area of deprivation.

The venue, he said, is used for NHS sessions and job fairs as well as by Surrey Heath Borough Council for consultations.

Cllr **Shaun Garrett** Councillor, Conservative group leader at Surrey Heath, said, there was “no getting around the incident” - that the brawl failed the the four pillars of licensing; prevention of crime and disorder, public safety, prevention of public nuisance and protecting children. But he argued that the club was a “really important community space”. He said: “If the licence was revoked for even a short period of time the club would fold and once it’s shut it will never open again.”

The committee also heard that the club’s chairperson had since resigned and replaced with a new board that would put in strict rules to prevent any repetition of the night. The club also runs as a private members bar that hosts functions. The committee heard many functions were increasingly attended by non-members.

Licence hold **Chris Turner**, acknowledged the failings of the club and pledged to make changes to it’s rules, including appointing new officers to run the club, bar staff training and apply for personal licences for at least two of the committee

members.

After a break to discuss the evidence committee chairperson, Councillor **Valerie White**, said the panel would: “Suspend the licence for a minimum of 28 days so that the mandatory steps can be taken and the club reopened with trained staff and new policies in place all proposals as per the club’s submissions...with the following amendments and additions.”

She said the club would need to have two members gain certification in order to carry out risk assessments for any functions held and to act as door supervisors if needed.

A signing-in book is to be used at all times to keep record of those attending functions, members and non-members, and that the club joins and becomes an active member of the pub-watch scheme.

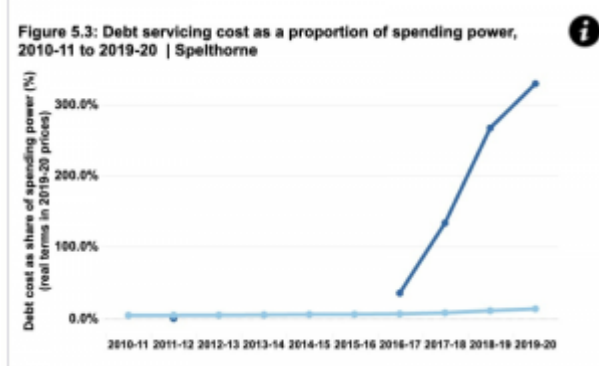
Any children must be accompanied by an adult and no children under 12 after 9pm are allowed in the club. All staff who serve alcohol are to be trained every six months with written records kept.

A spokesperson for Surrey Police said they were called out to the Old Dean Bowling Club in Camberley on Friday, April 14 at around 10.50pm following reports of 30 people fighting.

A 32-year-old man, a 29-year-old woman, a 33-year-old man, a 45-year-old man and a 38-year-old man were all arrested on suspicion of violent disorder. All have been bailed while the investigation continues.

Accountants shortage blamed for Surrey’s rising debts

13 July 2023



The scale of the financial problems unearthed by initial forensic exams of Woking Borough Council’s left many shocked. The council’s accounts had not been signed off by an independent auditor for more five years as part of a national shortage of qualified accountants that has left a high backlog across local government bodies.

Meanwhile, the borough’s chief financial officer warned things could get worse as they uncover more.

On June 23, the Public Accounts Committee said that delays to publishing audited accounts increases the risk of governance or financial issues being identified too late, and hinders accountability for £100billion in local government spending, with knock-on impacts for central government and the NHS.

It led to the committee’s deputy chairperson asking “how many more horror stories such as Croydon, Slough, Thurrock, and more recently the shocking case of Woking council are there remaining undetected?”

Following the report, the LDRS looked at three other Surrey councils with either high levels of borrowing, or that had experienced recent write-downs in the value of their assets and asked if residents can be confident their councils won’t go bust too.

Woking Borough Council – £1.7bn estimated debt in 2022, expected to rise to £2bn. There has also been an “absence of external audit opinions on the council’s accounts” since 2018/19. The majority of the council’s debt was built on complicated development deals. It borrowed hundreds of millions to pay companies it owned for town centre regeneration projects. It also funded its own loss-making businesses. Like many council’s Woking’s central funding fell significantly over the past decade.

According to the **National Audit Office** its Government-funded spending power dropped 69.2 per cent in the past decade. To counter this, it embarked on an investment strategy to cover the deficit, regenerate its town centres, and maintain non-statutory services.

In 2019/2020, the council received £6.7m from the Government, £9.9m from council tax and £28.7m from its investments.

The problem was that it spent £17.7m on services, £6m on minimum revenue provision, and £33.1m just on the interest on its debts.

The Public Audits Committee published the “Timeliness of local auditor reporting” on June 23, three weeks after Woking Borough Council issued its section 114 notice declaring it could no longer balance its books.

Chairperson, **Dame Meg Hillier** MP, said: “Our Committee warned in 2021 that the system of local government audit was close to breaking point. Disappointingly, since then the situation has only gotten worse. The cases of Croydon, Slough, Thurrock and Woking councils all should serve as flashing red signals for the Government, and our report finds that the rot risks spreading to central government finance and the NHS.

Deputy chairperson **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** MP,said: “How many more horror stories such as Croydon, Slough,

Thurrock, and more recently the shocking case of Woking council are there remaining undetected, which ultimately always have to be bailed out at huge costs to the taxpayer? The fragility of the number of qualified people and firms tending to carry out these important audits means that the system will only get worse before it gets better.”

Spelthorne Borough Council – £1bn debt as of 2022, last set of audited accounts signed off: 2017/18. In 2022, there were nine local authorities with borrowing of more than £1bn.

They were either major population centres, Transport for London, Birmingham, Greater London Authority, Leeds, Warrington, Edinburgh, and South Lanarkshire, or bankrupt; Woking.

The other is Spelthorne Borough Council, with a debt of £1,084,655.00 and a capital programme under review from central government. Last week, it emerged that £50m development plans for Thameside House has now jumped to £80m – mirroring, albeit on a smaller scale, Woking’s Victoria Square development originally budgeted to cost £150m but now stands at £750m and a book value of around half that.

Since 2010, Spelthorne’s Government funded spending power has fallen 66.3 per cent creating the same environment of needing to find alternative funding or reduce services. The council borrowed £1bn over a three-year period from the Public Works Loans Board and income from its investments brought in £55.3m in 2019/20 – out of a total of £72.8m. That allows the council to spend £16m on services while paying off £24.2m in interest payments with £11.1m set aside to pay off the principle.

The sustainability of the strategy is less obvious with the council’s debt servicing as a proportion of spending power climbing to 328.1 per cent, higher than even Woking’s 295.2 per cent for the same 2019/20 year. A spokesperson for Spelthorne Borough Council said: “The financial situation is significantly different between Spelthorne and Woking Borough Council. Spelthorne has taken steps to ensure that the commercial property programme is sustainable, and our investment model is very different. We have always taken a cautious approach, paying down debt on a year-by-year basis (like a mortgage) and ensured that the council has fully complied with the CIPFA requirements for Minimum Revenue Provision. The council took a long-term strategic view to acquire key investment and regeneration properties in order to generate income to support and fund council services, affordable housing, and regenerations programmes.

“We save up funds over a long-term time frame and have set aside £37.8m sinking fund to cover potential dips in income. Spelthorne Council has the highest ratio of usable reserves to net revenue budget of any district or borough council in the country.”

Runnymede Borough Council: £600m debt as of 2022, last set of audited accounts: 2018/19

Runnymede Borough Council is awaiting the findings of a Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities report into its finances and its strategy to borrow heavily for town centre redevelopment projects.

It is another council that followed the investment/redevelopment route, in part to cover the 55.5 per cent decrease in its Government-funded spending power. High profile developments such as Addlestone One and the Egham Town Centre have changed their local areas with new shopping centres, hotels and cinemas. But they have also resulted in the council’s debt servicing costs climbing to 168.9 per cent, about half of the levels in Woking or Spelthorne but still way above the national average of 13.4 per cent for local authorities.

The investments brought in £28.1m in 2019/20, from a total of £40.8m in income, which covers the borough’s £13.4m spending on service as well as its £11.1m in interest repayments and £3.2 for the principal.

A spokesperson for Runnymede Borough Council said it “only undertakes borrowing where it is prudent and affordable. Our current capital programme, approved in February 2023, does not include any new major schemes that require additional borrowing. We have a robust policy covering the repayment of debt, which is reviewed annually as part of the budget process and is included in all the council’s financial plans. We continue to set a balanced budget and to hold sufficient reserves to manage known risks alongside contingency for unforeseen events.

“The local government sector is suffering from the effects of the backlog in the audit profession. The Council is still awaiting final sign off for its 2019/20 accounts. “Since 2010 there have been significant cutbacks to local government funding. We calculate the loss of revenue support grant to be in excess of £5million, which equates to a third of our net budget. This has been partially offset by other grants, but only modestly. To protect services, we have had to raise our own sources of income whilst making efficiencies.”

Surrey Heath Borough Council: £51m debt at 2022, last set of audited accounts 2018/19. Debt levels in 2022 stood at £51m, putting Surrey Heath Borough Council in a different position compared with Woking, Spelthorne and Runnymede. However, it has since emerged in unaudited accounts that its debt grew to £160m and its biggest asset dropped by £79m. This prompted the council to announce it was updating its property acquisition strategy despite its government-supported funding dropping by 60 per cent in the last decade.

This change in approach is taking place even though its 2019/20 debt servicing levels were comparatively low among Surrey peers at 41.8 per cent – although its debt levels have since climbed. The council balanced its books in a more conventional manner with just £3.3m of its £15.5m income coming from its investments that year. This covered the £9.96m to run its services, with £2.3m paid in interest and £2.2m set aside to pay off the debt.

A spokesperson for Surrey Heath Borough Council it was considered to have a “sound strategy for debt management as per the annual Treasury Strategy agreed at Council in February. We are not interlinked with Woking Council and therefore it is considered that no changes are required. The Medium Term Financial Strategy approved at February council contains a minimum revenue provision for future debt repayment. This has been calculated in accordance with central government and CIPFA guidance.

They added: “The council no longer receives any revenue support grant from central Government. The council retains business rate income, but also has to pay a tariff on this to central government. It is difficult to put a £ and % figure on

this as the real term reduction is a great deal higher than the actual cash reduction.”

The committee report concluded that the backlog of audit opinions for local government bodies remains unacceptably high, and that there is still no plan to reduce it.

Only 12 per cent of local government bodies received their audit opinions in time to publish accounts for 2021-22 within the already extended local authority accounts publication deadline.

Derby disrupter doesn't quite go down

13 July 2023



Ben Newman ran onto the Epsom racecourse seconds after the starter gates opened on the 3rd June 2023 Derby flat-race. Though the horses were still out of sight by the time several security and police officers dragged him off in front of the Grandstand, his act was prosecuted as a public nuisance.

Appearing in custody before Recorder David Ockelton at Guildford Crown Court he was sentenced today (6th July).

The court heard from Wendy Cottee prosecuting that it was only the swift action of security and police that ensured the race itself proceeded undisturbed. Nevertheless, it was clear from video and audio footage that many members of the public were “seriously annoyed”. She also told the court that Newman had sent an appeal on social media calling for a large number of sympathisers of “Animals Rising” to join him in his protest. An appeal the Judge commented had not been successful.

Defending Mr Nick Goss said that Newman was passionate and well intentioned. He did not intend to create danger but only to protest. His time in custody since 3rd June had been a “salutary lesson” and caused him to reflect on his actions.

Newman has been arrested over the last year in connection with various sporting events and was on bail with a condition not to attend public sporting events on 3rd June. Mr Goss stated that none of these investigations had led to any criminal charges.

The Judge said to Newman “The proud liberties of our constitution have limits - you went beyond those limits. There was a clear danger to police and security. You could not predict how long it would take them to remove you.”

“The offence is serious with a maximum of 10 years. However, I will make the sentence as short as possible. It will be 18 weeks and it will be suspended for 2 years.”

The court ordered Newman to undertake 80 hours community service and to pay costs of £1800 and a victim surcharge of £126.

Met poaches Surrey police claims Commissioner

13 July 2023



Surrey has more police officers than ever before despite attempts by the Met to “poach” officers, according to the county’s Police and Crime Commissioner. **Lisa Townsend** told a meeting of the Police and Crime panel on Thursday (June 29) there were challenges around retention in the force and what was being done to address them.

But she said Surrey Police had beaten a government uplift target by 136 officers. Mrs Townsend described it as a “deliberate move” to over-recruit because officers in Surrey faced issues such as competitive wages and a high cost of living.

With the Met Police “offering quite large sums of money” to try to “poach” Surrey officers, Mrs Townsend pointed to targeted adverts on Surrey trains as one tactic used by the London force.

With 2,325 officers, she said the force was bigger than it had been before. Mrs Townsend spoke more than once in the meeting about the need for police to attend fewer non-critical mental health call outs. She said “pushing forward” with work to reduce police attending such calls would help with both recruitment and retention in Surrey.

The commissioner said: “People are coming in [to policing] because they want to catch the bad guys, they want to prevent crime, they want to protect the public. Increasingly they are being asked to do what is social work, particularly around mental health and concerns for welfare.”

Tandridge District Councillor **Richard Smith**, a former police officer, described officer retention as “like lemmings falling off a cliff”. He claimed in most organisations senior management “won’t tell the truth from what’s being said at the bottom end of the company because it makes them look bad”.

Mrs Townsend responded to say she spent a lot of time both with those at the top of the force and out on attachment with officers who she said she hoped were comfortable talking to her about the challenges. She said: “They do like to have a good whinge, and I am more than happy to listen. So I think we do have a pretty good grasp.”

With 395 officers having joined the force since 2019, **Cllr Alex Coley**, a member of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**, asked for the number of officers who had left in that period.

But Mrs Townsend didn’t give an answer on how many had left the force, saying the “total uplift” was what really mattered and it was “totally normal” to lose officers to retirement and other factors. Her office committed to giving the number to Cllr Coley after the meeting.

Mrs Townsend outlined measures to keep officers including adding to the force’s estates plan to provide more affordable homes, which 85 per cent of officers asked had said was important to them.

Image: Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend at the Surrey Police and Crime Panel budget hearing

Image: Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend at the Surrey Police and Crime Panel budget hearing

Epsom’s University challenges for graduates

13 July 2023



Students from the Class of ‘23 at the **University for the Creative Arts (UCA) in Epsom** descended upon London’s Royal Festival Hall for their graduation ceremony on Tuesday 4 July. This year over 700 students graduated from the Epsom campus of UCA.

Opening the ceremonies, **Professor Bashir Makhoul**, President and Vice-Chancellor of UCA, told graduating students: “*You are stepping out today into a world of great promise – the thriving creative industries – and the opportunities for creative graduates are endless. Be ready to seize them, and to embrace challenges, with an open mind.*”

“I am confident of your drive, unrelenting ambition, and passion for creativity, and I am eager to see how you will apply your talents and make a difference around the world.”

During the ceremonies, UCA Chancellor and renowned ceramicist, **Magdalene Odundo OBE** offered this piece of advice: “*Commit wholeheartedly to your goals and trust that your talent will enable you to achieve them. I’ve had the pleasure of working with some of the world’s greatest designers and artists, and they all share a common value: staying true to their vision.*”

In the presence of families, friends and staff across two days of ceremonies, graduates came up to the stage and collected their degree certificates – the culmination of their journey at UCA. Graduating students will now take their place in the global creative community as they embark on the next stage in their creative careers.

ULEZ court challenge begins

13 July 2023



The coalition of councils opposed to expansion of the ULEZ to outer London is optimistic of success on the first day of its legal challenge.

Representatives from the five councils – Bexley, Bromley, Harrow, Hillingdon and Surrey – met on the steps of the High Court in central London on Tuesday 4 July, ahead of the opening day of the Judicial Review the coalition has brought against TfL and the Mayor of London, over planned expansion of the ULEZ to outer London.

The coalition’s case will be argued on three grounds:

- Failure to follow statutory procedure – Schedule 23 Greater London Authority Act 1999
- Unlawful and unfair consultation regarding expected compliance rates in outer London
- Unlawfulness regarding scrappage scheme, including failing to consider a buffer zone, irrationality and inadequate consultation.

Through the new proposals, anyone driving a non-compliant vehicle in the expanded zone after the scheduled start date on Tuesday 29 August, would stand to be charged £12.50 per day – whether the journey is a 30-mile commute, or a short trip for essential groceries.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Transport, Infrastructure and Growth at Surrey County Council, said: *“I’m pleased that our hearing begins today, as we continue to highlight the significant financial and social impacts expansion of the ULEZ scheme would have on many of our residents and businesses.*

“However, it is very disappointing that it has had to come to this. Our concerns have never been addressed by The Mayor, forcing these legal proceedings in order to have the voice of our residents heard.

“We remain committed to delivering a greener future, but it must be done in a practical and sustainable way. We will now await the findings of the High Court.”

The hearing is scheduled to last for two days, with a ruling from the judge expected to follow at an unconfirmed date but expected ahead of the courts break for summer on 28 July.

Related Reports:

[ULEZ driving old cars to Epsom market](#)

[Challenge to ULEZ gaining grounds](#)

[Many Surrey motorists will be paying the ULEZ charge.](#)

[ULEZ Court battle looming](#)

Green complaints not black and white

13 July 2023



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council disagrees with the claims made by Green Belt campaigners reported 1st July. **Yufan Si** of Epsom and Ewell Green Belt and **Alexander Duval** stated that their clear objections to Green Belt development were not so classified in the consultation analysis by EEBC.

Steven McCormick (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee has hit back and said: “I would like to reassure all residents in the borough that, contrary to the assertions in this article, no responses to the consultation have been excluded, or ‘not counted’. Every single response we have received has been logged and published on our online platform, Inovem.

“We received a significant number of responses during the Local Plan consultation. Most respondents chose to complete the online questionnaire on Inovem. We also received copies of the questionnaire by email and by post, which have since been uploaded onto Inovem. On the questionnaire, respondents were invited to tick a multiple choice box for each policy area (this shows as the ‘Option’ column in the published responses), and whether they want to add comments (this shows

as the 'Comment' column in the published responses).

"Alongside responders that used the questionnaire, we also received a significant number of more general responses by email and post, which have also been uploaded onto Inovem. Whilst some of these responses made it clear which policy or policies they were referring to, in the majority of cases officers have used their judgement to assign the responses received to the relevant section of the Local Plan. As part of this process, officers have not completed the multiple choice 'option' questions and have left these blank, unless a response clearly stated the question number or policy reference and directly quoted one of the multiple-choice question response options.

"There is an important reason for this. Our officers cannot presume to know which option each respondent would want to use, if they want to use one at all – this would be a subjective decision by officers, and it may not be correct, particularly where responses do not state they are specifically for or against a policy, but are providing general feedback, which is common. All comments are still clearly displayed, and the comments are a vital element used by officers to ascertain what the views of respondents are regarding the different policies.

"All the comments received during the consultation period will help to inform the preparation of the next version of the plan for consultation, which will be the version of the Local Plan that the council intends to submit to the government for examination.

"We will publish a Consultation Statement alongside the next version of the Local Plan that will provide a summary of the main issues that have been raised and how they have been taken into account. Once again, we would like to assure residents that all responses have been published and are viewable on the consultation platform."

The Green Belt campaigners did not complain that their objections had not been published. How else could they have known how their responses were classified or not? Their complaint was that their stated objections were not classified correctly. As the reader will see from Cllr McCormick's response the business is not straightforward. The Green complaint is not black and white.

Under 21s Surrey bus travel at 50%

13 July 2023



Young people aged 20 and under are now entitled to 50% off all bus journeys across Surrey.

A new 'LINK' card has been developed by Surrey County Council which can be shown on any bus in Surrey to qualify for the discount on all single and return journeys. Applications can be made at www.surreycc.gov.uk/surreylink.

Journeys should start and/or end in Surrey and people in the qualifying age group must live in the county.

[**Epsom and Ewell Times** adds: the Surrey link discount card cannot be used on London Transport buses that many young Epsom and Ewell residents use, even for journeys entirely within Surrey. So, the 293 and the 406 and 418 etc are excluded. However, those who are 16 and 17 years old can apply for London Transport's own Transport for London's 16 plus Oyster photocard. The Oyster card will allow Surrey students to pay-as-you-go at half the adult single fare. For further details, contact 0845 300 7000 or visit the Transport for London website. And for young student train commuters you can apply for the National Railcard 16 to 17 Saver, it allows students 50% off single, return and season tickets.]

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Transport, Infrastructure and Growth at Surrey County Council said, "I'm delighted that we can now offer half price bus travel to all our young people here in Surrey.

"We know that cost can be a barrier to people using public transport so we hope this significant discount will make bus travel a more viable option, whilst also reducing car journeys across the county.

"This new scheme is part of our significant investment in bus travel and our efforts to encourage more people to use Surrey's buses. We're investing in making our buses greener including £32.3m for more ultra-low and zero emission buses and £6.3m for more ultra-low and zero emission community transport minibuses. A further £9m is being invested in bus priority measures to ensure buses turn up on time, and £1.4m in improving information for passengers at bus stops."

Simon Rowland, Chief Executive Officer for White Bus said, "I am very pleased that Surrey County Council, supported by the Enhanced Partnership Board, is launching this fantastic initiative to promote bus usage amongst the under 20s. This is a scheme that all operators and stakeholders will embrace as a key driver of passenger growth.

"It is the under 20s that are the next generation of bus users, and with the new LINK passes providing heavily discounted travel, we hope that travelling by bus will be the first choice of transport for this cohort."

More information is available at www.surreycc.gov.uk/surreylink