Tree felling foul of the law

The culprits who illegally chopped down more than 100 protected trees and damaged seven others have been fined nearly £20,000, Woking Borough Council said.

A landowner, together with its contractor were prosecuted and fined for the unauthorised felling of the trees near Upshot Lane, Pyrford, after pleading guilty at Guildford Magistrates' Court.

Burhill Development Ltd admitted it ignored a tree preservation order on its land and was made to pay £15,140, comprising fines of £11,000, a victim surcharge of £2,000 and costs of £2,140.

Their contractor, P&A Services, which carried out the work, also pleaded guilty to the unauthorised felling and causing damage to the protected trees and was ordered to pay a total of £2,900; fines of £1,000; a victim surcharge of £400; and council costs of £1,500.

The action was taken against the two firms by Woking Borough Council. The original hearing took place in October 2023 with the judge issuing sentence in March 2024.

Speaking about the prosecution, Beverley Kuchar, Woking Borough Council's strategic director for place, described it as an "important case" and welcomed the decision.

She said: "Whether you permit or cause wilful damage to our environment we will take legal action wherever necessary.

"It is important that landowners and their contractors take the necessary steps to understand what consent is required before commencing tree works.

"The status of the borough's trees can be checked quickly and simply online. If in doubt, our arboricultural team can provide advice in advance of any works commencing.

"There is no excuse and, as in this case, failure to do so can lead to a criminal prosecution and significant fines."

Tree Preservation Orders protect specific trees, groups of trees, or woodland that benefit the wider community

Psychiatric bed shortages in Surrey

A man tragically took his own life in Surrey after a mental health relapse, prompting a coroner to warn of a shortage of psychiatric beds in Surrey hospitals.

Jonathan Harris, 52, who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, died by suicide on June 27, 2022.

If an inpatient psychiatric hospital bed had been available just days earlier, Jonathan would not have died, the coroner ruled. Coroner Anna Crawford judged that action should be taken to prevent future deaths.

Bed shortages for mental health patients in Surrey, as well as nationwide, has been an ongoing issue for NHS Trusts. Many patients are forced to move up to 60 miles away from home to receive treatment because there are few beds in their area. The court heard that this is in the context of a national shortage of suitably qualified psychiatrists.

Following a lengthy psychiatric inpatient stay in Camberley in November 2021, Jonathan was under the care of Surrey Heath Community Mental Health Recovery Service, which is part of Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

Jonathan was prescribed anti-psychotic medication. In February and May 2022, Jonathan requested for his medication to be reduced to fortnightly and then once every three weeks.

The reduction in medication in May 2022 was judged as "premature" by the coroner. Jonathan had reportedly shown signs of appearing "suspicious" when he was seen by the Surrey Heath Mental Health Team (MHT) on May 4. However, these signs were not explored.

The mental health team were also aware Mr Harris was moving house, meaning and move to a new community mental health team, which may affect his wellbeing.

Jonathan's mental health continued to deteriorate and on June 24 it the MHT decided that he required an assessment under the Mental Health Act.

No inpatient bed was available and therefore the assessment did not take place. If Jonathan had been assessed, he would have been detained under the Mental Health Act and admitted to hospital.

The coroner said: "Mr Harris would not have taken his own life had he remained well and the relapse of his paranoid schizophrenia materially contributed to his death.

"Mr Harris would not have died had an inpatient psychiatric hospital bed been available on either 24, 25 or 26 June 2022.

"The court also heard that there is an ongoing shortage of available inpatient psychiatric beds in Surrey and that this is in the context of a national shortage of inpatient psychiatric beds. The court is concerned that both of these matters present a risk of future deaths."

The Prevention of Future Deaths report was issued to NHS England rather than to Surrey and Borders Partnership. NHS England was invited to comment; it said it is working to the coroner's deadline of 56 days to respond with the action it will take or proposed to take, and such information is not yet available.

Related reports:

Coroner catalogues care failures in diabetic death

Better private - public health communications could prevent deaths

New Chief Executive for County

Surrey County Council has appointed **Terence Herbert** as its new Chief Executive.

Terence, currently Chief Executive at Wiltshire Council, was chosen after a robust recruitment process to find a replacement for **Joanna Killian**.

Subject to formal ratification at an extraordinary Full Council meeting on 9 April 2024, Terence is expected to take over as Chief Executive in the summer.

Leader of Surrey County Council **Tim Oliver** said: "Terence is an outstanding leader bringing over 25 years of local government experience to the role, and it is excellent news that he will be joining us.

"Under his leadership, Wiltshire is regarded as a strong local authority – one of the largest unitary authorities in the country – with sound finances and a high-performing workforce.

"I am certain that he will be a tremendous asset to Surrey and is the right person to lead us as we face the challenges ahead."

Terence said: "I am delighted to have been appointed as the Chief Executive of Surrey County Council. I'm looking forward to working with the leader, Members, staff and our partners to build on Surrey's significant track record and lead the organisation through the next stage of its transformation in what continues to be a challenging time for local government.

"Having spent much of my earlier career in children's services and mental health, I am passionate about delivering quality services for the most vulnerable residents across our communities. I know the importance of retaining a motivated and ambitious workforce with a focus on celebrating the success of our staff, so this is an area that will be a key priority for me."

Terence joined Wiltshire Council in 2011, where he was appointed Chief Executive in June 2020. Prior to this he held a number of senior leadership roles including Head of Service for Safeguarding, Associate Director for Children's Services, Executive Director for Children & Families, Leisure & Communities, Corporate Services and HR & Organisational Development, and Chief Executive Officer for People.

Terence began his career as a Registered Mental Nurse (RMN) and then qualified as a social worker, taking up posts in children's services at the London Borough of Lewisham, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and North Somerset Council.

Related reports:

Surrey chief moves on after 6 years

County CEO's pay rise triggering strikes?

Enforcing planning enforcement in Epsom and Ewell

In a comprehensive analysis of the **Epsom & Ewell Borough Council**'s planning enforcement procedures, a recent audit report titled "EPSOM & EWELL BOROUGH COUNCIL INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT 2023-24," conducted by the Southern Internal Audit Partnership in February 2024, has brought to light a litany of deficiencies and failures. These findings, detailed in a thorough examination of the council's practices, underscore significant shortcomings in record-keeping, response times to complaints, and the enforcement of regulatory measures.

Central to the audit's findings is the examination of the administration of planning enforcement, a critical function entrusted with ensuring the adherence of development activities to established regulatory frameworks. Despite assertions by the council regarding the existence of a comprehensive Local Enforcement Plan, purportedly designed to outline clear guidelines and timelines for enforcement actions, the reality paints a starkly contrasting picture upon closer scrutiny.

"Testing of a sample of cases revealed a disconcerting trend of non-compliance with stipulated timelines," the report notes. Contrary to the Local Enforcement Plan's mandate of acknowledging receipt of planning enforcement complaints within five working days, numerous instances were found where this requirement was not met, resulting in prolonged delays and a lack of clarity for complainants.

Moreover, deficiencies in the triage process, a critical step in determining the priority level of enforcement cases, were exposed. Despite the plan's directive to assign priority levels ranging from one to three, the absence of mechanisms within the council's system to accurately record these priorities severely hampered monitoring efforts. As a result, the council's ability to effectively manage and expedite enforcement actions was compromised, leading to further delays and inefficiencies.

"Key documentation associated with enforcement actions was found to be missing altogether," the audit report reveals, casting serious doubts on the thoroughness of investigations and the efficacy of enforcement measures. In several instances where enforcement notices were issued, no evidence of follow-up actions to ensure compliance was found, directly contravening statutory requirements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

The repercussions of these systemic failures extend beyond procedural lapses to tangible impacts on the community and the council's reputation. So heard a meeting of the Council's **Audit and Scrutiny Committee** Thursday 28th March. Councillor **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley), drawing from her extensive experience in planning, expressed profound dismay at the council's failure to uphold its responsibilities in enforcing planning regulations. "I am totally surprised that we haven't dealt with this in a more timely fashion," she remarked. "This reflects poorly on our council, and I am deeply concerned about the potential consequences of unchecked development activities."

Echoing these sentiments, Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) highlighted the significance of planning enforcement to residents, citing recurring issues and delays in addressing enforcement matters. "For many residents, planning enforcement is a top priority," he emphasized. "The council's failure to act swiftly in response to complaints undermines public confidence and raises serious questions about its commitment to upholding regulatory standards."

In response to queries raised by councillors, council officers sought to clarify the circumstances surrounding the appointment of a permanent Enforcement Officer. While acknowledging the existence of temporary officers in the past, they emphasized the recent transition to a permanent role as a step towards addressing staffing concerns within the planning department.

Stoneleigh library flats for homeless

Two flats above a library are set to be used as temporary accommodation for homeless people, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council decided yesterday (March 26).

Demand for temporary accommodation is "acute", according to the council. It is currently predicting an overspend of £200,000 of its £1.5m temporary accommodation budget, according to the Local Democracy Reporting Service.

Two self-contained, two bedroom maisonettes that sit above the Stoneleigh Community Library in Epsom that are accessed through the back of the building are earmarked for use.

Surrey County Council, who commercially lease the empty flats, have reportedly refurbished the maisonettes to a "high standard"

and will require "minimal preparation" to be used as temporary accommodation.

Emergency and temporary accommodation is provided to housing register applicants whilst their claim is being investigated. Homeless people currently sit in Band A of the council's housing allocations.

Around 235 homeless 'households' (i.e individuals or families) were accommodated by the council in 2021, with 155 in temporary accommodation and 80 in nightly-paid accommodation, costing up to £140 a night.

Meeting documents state the decision will create a real cost saving of £30,920 pa for the two maisonettes combined to the council.

A budget of £15,000 was agreed to cover the development of the site, with £5,000 covering legal and/or surveyor costs to the council and contributing to SCC for landlord approval costs. An additional £10,000 is set aside for a maisonettes preparation contingency.

Owned by a private landlord, the borough council will under lease from SCC who currently commercially lets the property. SCC and Epsom and Ewell Borough Council lease will co-expire in just under three years. The terms will then be renewed or renegotiated.

Stoneleigh Community Library (Credit Google Maps)

Was County HQ sold for a song?

Surrey County Council faces scrutiny over its £25 million sale of a former headquarters site after it was revealed it could have a gross development value of £250 million once revedelopment is completed. The new owner of the former HQ has listed the site for sale with a gross development value of 10 times more than the council got when it sold the historic building in 2021.

The huge gap between the two figures led to the county council to be challenged on whether it got the best deal for residents although the lead member for property said it secured a "good deal" and would sell it again at the same price. The 5.2 acre site in Kingston is being marketed by Savills. It is described as a "landmark opportunity" with "stunning former County Hall buildings" and has planning permission for 254 private apartments. 16 shared ownership apartments, and 20 affordable rent apartments.

Rob Pollock, Savills director, London development, said in a statement promoting the sale: "With its scale and heritage, Surrey County Hall offers the opportunity to deliver a truly unique development in southwest London that might seem more at home in central London, and consequently appeal to buyers across the city. With world famous attractions like Hampton Court and Wimbledon Tennis Club in striking distance of the property, combined with the obvious curb-side appeal, we expect that the ultimate developer of the property will set new record for pricing in Kingston."

The sale was discussed during the Tuesday March, 19 meeting of Surrey County Council. In March 2021 Surrey County Council sold the site for about £25m to RER Kingston Limited, according to officers although it was suggested the figure may have been "in excess" of that.

Councillor Robert Evans (Lab Stanwell and Stanwell Moor) asked: "When Surrey County Council was selling County Hall, its former Kingston headquarters, developers RER issued a release stating it had a guide price of £20m. This week Savills has issued a press release stating the site now has a Gross Development Value of £250m.

"Can the council tell us exactly how much it got for its former Grade 2 listed site, and whether it feels this was best value for residents seeing as it now has the potential to bring in hundreds of millions of pounds for its new owners?"

In a written response, he was told the council sold the site for £25million, on a subject to contract only basis, following "an extensive open marketing campaign for which best value was secured". Since the sale, RER (Kingston) Ltd has been holding the 300,000 sq. ft site vacant, while pursuing a planning application through the Royal Borough of Kingston to convert much of the former complex into residential units.

The official council response read: "Costs would have been incurred for empty business rate liability, which would have been circa £700,000 per annum alongside security and other holding void costs. "Although planning consent is now expected, RER have placed the complex on the market through Savills.

"Whilst the agents suggest a potential value post development, it should be noted that when fully sold or let, this is not the value that a market bidder will pay for the asset today. A value bid would consider the cost, timing and risks of the development, the capital investment needed to complete any approved scheme (heritage build costs, consultant fees, ongoing security, void costs,

finance costs at elevated rates since 2021) and the marketing period to sell or rent all units once converted.

"This could be a further three to five year project". As part of the sale agreement the council negotiated a contractual position to secure any excess of value that might arise from any future development "if the quantum of development exceeded a certain level".

When asked to elaborate on this, cabinet member for property, waste and infrastructure, Councillor Natalie Bramhall said the developers had spent £700,000 a year on empty rates, had to cover the cost of security, and that planning application costs would have been in excess of £1m.

She added that to get to the full £250m they would also need to spend 'hundreds of millions" to bring it forward. She said: "Residual land value with planning persimmon is between £35m and £40m.

"Somebody is going to have to spend hundreds of millions of pounds bringing that forward and I would suggest that as the purchaser is trying to sell at this time in the market which is probably at the bottom they spent far more on this site then they probably expected already. I actually think we secured a good deal and would again sell at that price."

Image - former SCC HQ County Hall in Kingston. Surrey Live

Unstable world, religious discrimination, the Local Plan and trains

We live, sadly, in an increasingly unstable world. The situation in Israel and Gaza has been and continues to be horrendous. There is a huge international diplomatic effort, involving the UK and other European countries, the US and countries across the Middle East, working to try to find a way of bringing both a short and long term resolution to the conflict. I really hope it succeeds.

At the same time the situation in Ukraine seems increasingly difficult, with Russia starting to make ground again in the conflict. In the short term at least there seems little prospect of peace – and my heart goes out to all of the Ukrainian families here in Epsom as they fear for their friends and relatives there.

But at Easter time I would also like to remember another group facing violence and persecution around the world. Every week I receive a newsletter from a member of one of our local Churches about what seems to be an endless stream of violence against Christian communities around the world. In Nigeria and Pakistan in particular attacks on Churches and Christian homes happen all too regularly, and in Nigeria thousands of Christians have been killed or kidnapped by extremists in recent years.

Christian communities are not alone. Ahmadiyya Muslims, a minority group in the Muslim faith, are another example of a group which faces persecution around the world.

In Epsom where different faiths live side by side, and where Church communities are strong and free to worship, we should never forget how fortunate we are compared to many in the world.

**

As I enter my last few months in Parliament, so the debate over the local plan in Epsom is beginning to heat up again. I will no longer be MP by the time it is finalised, but as a local resident as well I have a very strong interest in making sure it is done in the right way.

At the same time we can be in no doubt that we need new homes to be built. We cannot continue with a situation where so many people are struggling to get into a home of their own.

That's why I have always argued that we need substantial smart development in this area, making best use of existing developed land, and mixing commercial and residential buildings in a way that is carefully and thoughtfully designed.

What this area does not need is more substantial family homes built on green belt land away from existing public transport. We need starter homes and affordable homes close to local centres.

I hope that even at this late stage the Residents Association councillors who control the Borough Council will change tack and look at the very real opportunities for smart brownfield development in the area. We can build substantial numbers of new homes without creating a new urban sprawl on the farm land to the East and West of Epsom.

With development, it is always much easier just to build on a green field. But the easy option is not always the best one. And in

Epsom and Ewell it is certainly not.

**

If you travel by train into London, you have probably seen the new trains for our network lined up in sidings at Clapham Junction. They have been there for some time. And not in service.

There are a variety of reasons why our line is suffering from worsening overcrowding at the moment – and I am pushing South Western Railway very hard on this. Last year I got some extra semi-fast trains added to the evening peak timetable. Now I am working to do the same at other times of day.

But a lot of the problems would be solved if the new 10 coach trains were coming on stream. But it seems pretty clear that the main reason they are still parked in the sidings is because the unions are still dragging their feet on allowing them to be used. The reason - they are new, modern trains which work in a different way to the old ones. And the changes are still being resisted.

Perhaps one day the union leadership will put the passenger first. I am not optimistic.

Fast track your planning application at a premium

From 1 April 2024, applicants submitting certain planning applications in Epsom & Ewell will be able to choose to 'fast track' their application.

Developed to meet customer demands, the new optional service will be helpful to applicants who have a builder waiting to start work, or who need building work to start or finish by a certain date. Applicants will be able to pay to have their planning applications determined more quickly than the statutory eight-week period.

The types of applications that can be fast-tracked are:

- Householder Applications for instance, those required for extending homes e.g. building a single storey rear extension, or front porch.
- Certificate of Lawful Development Proposed (Householder) an application to show that the work you are proposing to do to a house is a 'permitted development' and therefore doesn't need a formal application. Sometimes you will need a certificate of this nature when you sell a house.

The fast-track fee is £350 for a Householder Application and £150 for a Lawful Development Certificate and is paid to the council, in addition to the usual cost of submitting a planning application.

Councillor Steve McCormick, (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Committee, said,

"We are incredibly proud of our Planning department who in the last year, have overcome significant challenges to go from being one of 10 UK council teams performing below an expected threshold of 70% for minor/other applications, to well exceeding national targets. It is brilliant that Epsom & Ewell Borough Council can now facilitate a service which will meet an obvious need for many residents wishing to progress building projects within the borough.

"I hope that this will ease stress for many people working to tight timelines for their builds."

Applicants can learn more about the service and apply by visiting the council's dedicated webpage: Fast Track Service | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (epsom-ewell.gov.uk)

How many £s does it take to change a Council light bulb?

The cost of changing Council light bulbs was the subject of some concern at Tuesday 26th March's meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**. The committee was considering the annual maintenance

programme for Council run properties.

Cllr. **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) enquired: "I thank the officers for a very thorough report, but when I look at the planned maintenance, it does seem to me that this is an area where a stricter financial control is perhaps needed. I look at some of these figures with amazement. £56,000 to change the light bulbs in Bourne Hall. £70,000 to paint the woodwork in Ewell Court House. What controls do we have that we are getting value for money from these contractors?"

The Council Officer replied: "With Bourne Hall, to change a light bulb in this building is not a simple case of getting a step ladder out. It needs scaffolding to get up to these lights here. The costs of replacing the lighting also includes all the equipment to enable those lights to be replaced where they're in very hard to reach positions. So it's not just simply changing light bulbs."

Cllr Leach's question on financial controls was left unanswered.

Cllr. **Alison Kelly** (LibDem College) wanted to know about the environmental cost of the main entrance doors to the Epsom Playhouse that open directly onto the lobby. It was observed that the construction of an second inner set of doors was resisted by the theatre as it would take away vital fover space.

Cllr. **Graham Jones** MBE (RA Cuddington) had earlier that day taken a stroll over to the Epsom Playhouse and had a "light bulb" moment. He suggested: "I've seen quite a lot of places where instead of taking away from the lobby you go outwards. There's lots of space there, and it would make a really nice feature and I would recommend that you consider that option." His idea was warmly received with the officer responding: "That would be exactly the solution. Hence why it would need to be a future capital bid. Because that's clearly a larger project than creating it within the building itself. But you're absolutely spot on. Thank you."

Cancer patient getting the right royal treatment

The first cancer patient set to undergo a revolutionary new procedure that could cut treatment time to almost a quarter said it was a "privilege" to be given the opportunity.

The **Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust** is taking part in a new clinical trial led by the **Royal Marsden** into prostate cancer. Currently, patients are treated with radiotherapy over a minimum of 20 treatments which lasts four weeks or more. Under this new process, that time could be reduced to one and a half weeks.

Michael Robson, 78, is the first patient to be part of the trial in Royal Surrey. He was diagnosed in December 2023. He said: "One of my friends was diagnosed with prostate cancer and he said I should get a test so I had a blood test and I was called by my GP and sent for an appointment at urology. I was fortunate enough to meet Dr Philip Turner who gave me the options and went through everything. Everything has been explained to me in a way that is easy to understand and made the journey so much easier to deal with. All of the staff I couldn't complement them highly enough. They have been fantastic."

Michael was given options for treatment and was asked if he was interested in taking part in the clinical trial and he agreed straight away. He added: "It's been fantastic here. I feel very privileged to be the first patient. The service has been first class from everybody concerned."

Patients with low and intermediate risk disease who took part in a trial called PACE-B demonstrated that the process would work in the tighter time frames. This new study is to determine whether those considered high-risk would get the same benefits. The trial, called PACE-NODES, was opened at The Royal Marsden and was designed jointly by investigators from Queen's University Belfast and The Institute of Cancer Research, London.

Dr Philip Turner, consultant clinical oncologist and principal investigator for the trial, said: "We are delighted to be opening the PACE NODES trial in Royal Surrey. This is part of our drive to give Surrey patients access to the very best oncology clinical trials from across the UK and indeed from across the world.

"The benefits with regard to timing are enormous – the standard of care for these men is a minimum of four weeks of daily visits which is very disruptive to life. The rates of side effects are low. Crucially, the five fraction treatment appears just as safe as conventional 20 fraction treatments which we have been using for years very safely."

Chief executive Louise Stead said: "Royal Surrey has a long and proud tradition of being a premier centre of UK oncology research and we are determined, with the support of our patients and other partners, to ensure as many patients as possible have access to ground-breaking research close to home. If successful, this could make a huge difference to patients receiving treatment for prostate cancer."

L-R: Radiographer Kate Maltby, Michael Robson, Dr Philip Turner