

## Deteriorating standards

NERVOUSLY looking over his shoulder at the catastrophic financial collapse at Tory-run Northamptonshire County Council following years of financial incompetence, David Hodge, Surrey's Tory leader, has admitted his administration is also in deep financial trouble.

Surrey residents have been experiencing many of the same consequences as in Northants, with deteriorating services and infrastructure.

Surrey's roads are now legendary for their potholes and even more seriously its children's services have failed their past two Ofsted inspections.

Mr Hodge and his cabinet colleagues lay much of the blame for the county's dismal performance on their central government colleagues – and with some justification. Eight years of cuts have stripped £15bn from councils in England, as the government seeks to transfer some of the unpopularity for its austerity policies to local government.

However, this is no excuse for not having effectively tackled the county's ponderous and bureaucratic management structure.

Symptomatic of this is the failure to relocate County Hall from Kingston, which has been outside Surrey since local government organisation in 1965. As a result, many of the county's senior staff live outside the county.

Following numerous failed attempts at improvement through "transformation programmes", the county, realising it is in the last chance saloon, has brought in a new chief executive who appears to be attempting to tackle its management and cultural problems. We can only hope she succeeds.

You might imagine, with so many problems, the county would be focused on its duty to serve the public. The very last thing it should be doing is gamble a reported £50m of public money on the highly-risky developments now called Brightwells Yard in Farnham.

This is demonstrably risky, as neither the developer Crest Nicholson nor any institutional investor was remotely willing to fund the 25 retail units, eight restaurants and six-screen, 750-seat cinema which Surrey is due to invest in.

Surrey apparently has done this to try to dig its friends at Waverley out of the deep £10m black hole it had dug for itself in subsidising Crest Nicholson. In doing so, it will be making a much bigger black hole for itself and a situation where both councils will have very little chance of recovering the public money they have sunk into this scheme.

An awakening to the realities of the situation may now be emerging at Surrey, as in the latest management reshuffle, the chief property officer, who would have played a significant part in the decisions on Brexit, has departed.

It will be interesting to see if the relevant councillors at both Waverley and Surrey face up to their responsibilities when the time comes to do so.

Surrey calls this scheme "town centre regeneration", apparently unaware East Street is not part of the town centre retail area.

The appropriate use of this area, which would improve the centre, would be a well-designed mixed housing scheme supporting an entertainment, cultural and cafe society area, including attractive experiences for all ages.

The actual town centre, which is currently disconnected from the East Street area by an unpleasant polluted road, The Borough and junction, the Red Deer, does need regeneration – not with more shops, but by tackling the town's major traffic problems and making the centre a pleasant area for shoppers and pedestrians.

So what can be done about the now-developing horror show of four years of major disruption in the town as East Street and the neighbouring Woolmead, the town's two largest-ever developments, are being allowed to proceed at the same time?

Surrey and Waverley must develop a Plan B ready to implement the moment it becomes clear East Street has failed.

The consequences of all major schemes being almost entirely driven by the developers may finally make clear the compelling need for a proper town plan, which, it is to be hoped, Jeremy Hunt will use his influence to promote.

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