

West Surrey Council Candidates Debate – 24 April 2026

The meeting focused extensively on the significant financial challenges confronting the newly formed West Surrey Council, which is set to inherit a combined debt of £3.8 billion from Woking, Spelthorne, and Surrey County Councils. This figure already accounts for a £500 million support package from the government, but participants noted that this assistance, while helpful, is insufficient to fully address the scale of the debt. The government has indicated a willingness to provide ongoing oversight and potentially further support, but no concrete commitments beyond the initial tranche have been made.

Candidates and attendees discussed the origins of the debt, particularly highlighting mismanagement and risky property investments by Woking Council, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent business failures. There was a strong sense of frustration among residents about having to bear the burden of debts incurred by other areas, with some questioning the fairness of the arrangement and whether the debt could be renegotiated or more widely distributed.

The debate covered a range of potential strategies for managing the financial strain, including the sale of council-owned properties, rigorous audits, and cost-saving measures that aim to protect essential services. Candidates shared examples from Surrey Heath, where transformation programs and asset sales have been used to maintain key services like meals on wheels and community support, despite budget pressures. There was consensus that difficult decisions would need to be made, and that transparency and honesty with residents would be crucial.

The impact of the debt on council tax rates was a major concern, with fears that significant increases could be required to service the debt and maintain statutory services. Some candidates argued that efficient management and cost-cutting could limit tax rises, while others warned that, in the event of financial crisis, government intervention could force double-digit council tax hikes, as seen in other authorities.

The process of harmonising council tax rates across the new authority is expected to take several years, with some areas facing steeper increases than others. The restructuring of local government was also discussed, with the new West Surrey Council replacing several existing councils and reducing the number of local councillors. While some saw potential for more streamlined and effective service delivery, others worried about reduced local representation and increased workloads for the remaining councillors. The need for councillors to be highly committed and able to dedicate significant time was emphasised, with candidates pledging to prioritise their council duties.

Other topics included the future of local services such as policing and education, which will be reorganised under the new authority but are expected to retain some local focus through area teams and committees. The importance of maintaining local identity and ensuring that residents continue to have a voice in decision-making was repeatedly stressed.

Finally, participants encouraged residents to engage with the new council and to vote in the upcoming elections, noting that high turnout would help ensure that the new authority is truly representative of the community's needs and priorities.

Outline

Debt Inheritance and Financial Support

- Audience Speaker raises concerns about the debt inherited by the new West Surrey Council and its impact on their judgement as new councillors.
- Candidate AF explains that the government will provide 500 million pounds in support and mentions a commission set up to manage finances.
- Candidate MR emphasizes that SHBC's finances are in a healthy position despite some misinformation.
- Candidates acknowledge the total debt to be inherited is 3.8 billion pounds, including contributions from Woking, Spelthorne, and Surrey County Councils.
- Candidate MR discusses the difficulty of managing the 3.8 billion pounds of debt and the pressure on services, with 30% of income needed for debt servicing. He highlights Surrey Heath Borough Council's robust approach to managing debt through transformation programs and property sales.
- Audience Speaker expresses frustration about having to pay someone else's debt and criticizes the mismanagement that led to the current situation.
- Candidate RW agrees on the challenge of managing the debt and suggests a fresh start with a thorough audit and cost-cutting measures.

Impact on Council Tax and Local Services

- Candidate RW argues that Reform can save money and reduce council tax, citing examples from other councils.
- Audience Speaker suggests that council tax should be set at a fair level, considering the council's financial situation and the government's potential funding cuts.
- Candidate MR explains the concept of council tax harmonization over seven years and its impact on different areas.
- Candidate RW emphasizes the need for the new council to make tough decisions on service delivery to manage the debt effectively.
- Candidate JO emphasises need for Councillors to be accessible and active.

Local Representation and Decision-Making

- Audience Speaker criticizes the government's decision to merge councils, arguing it will reduce local representation and decision-making power.
- Candidate AF believes the new mayor will make strategic decisions that could benefit local residents, despite the reduction in councillors.
- Candidate MR argues that while the workload on councillors will increase, they will have direct access to a single team, making it easier to respond to local issues.
- Candidate JO stated effective contact with officers delivers results.
- Candidate AF & RW stresses the importance of making the new authority work for local residents and ensuring effective local representation.

National Issues and Local Elections

- Audience Speaker questions how the new council will address national issues like the decline in national identity and security.
- Candidate RW responds by emphasizing the need to protect the country from undesirable individuals and improve the armed forces.
- Candidate AF encourages voters to focus on local policies and representation, rather than national issues.
- Candidate MR agrees, highlighting the importance of local issues and the need for a high turnout in the local elections.

Commitment to Service and Workload Management

- Audience Speaker asks if the candidates are willing to take on the increased workload of the new council.
- Candidate JO expresses a willingness to continue to commit as many hours as needed to serve the community.
- Candidate MR also expresses willingness to continue commit as many hours as needed and has flexible employment.
- Candidate AF mentions running a home business and being able to manage the new council's demands.
- Candidate RW refers to being retired and able to commit many hours to being a Councillor
- Candidate MR emphasizes the importance of having a diverse set of councillors and being able to balance professional and council responsibilities.

Planning and Local Involvement

- Audience Speaker asks about the impact of the new council on planning and local involvement.
- Candidate MR explains that planning will likely remain within the area for a period, with area committees for local input.
- Audience Speaker highlights the importance of local residents being active in the new council to ensure their voices are heard.
- Candidate MR mentions the Surrey Heath local plan, which will determine the area's future planning for at least the next 10 to 15 years.