

Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up

14 January 2026



BBC LDRS reports: A Surrey council [Epsom and Ewell] must pay out up to £500,000 after failing to properly check the condition of a major leisure centre before handing it over to a new operator. Poor ventilation, damp and ‘possible roof cracks’ were cited as some of the problems related to the “fabric” of the building.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has agreed to cover the costs of urgent repairs at Rainbow Leisure Centre after the new contractors took over the site and uncovered a long list of issues, some relating to the structure and fabric of the building. Places Leisure took over the contract on October 1, 2025, but has not yet signed on the dotted line, the LDRS understands.

The pay out was approved via a confidential urgent decision, seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), after Places Leisure said it should not be responsible for fixing the issues.

An urgent decision is when a council cannot wait until the usual decision-making committee process as it could harm the public or council interests.

Some of the problems relate to the fabric of the building, for which the council is responsible, the LDRS understands. This is despite the council previously insisting it had carried out such checks.

In a public report dated June 2025, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council said it had commissioned a stock condition report to make sure the building was handed over in good nick.

As the LDRS understands, council officers believed the centre would be handed back in good condition. An external consultant was used, but their inspection was not invasive, meaning hidden problems may not have been picked up. But just six months later, the authority is now facing a bill of up to £500k to fix problems that either were missed or not properly dealt with because the council did not know about them.

When Places took over, it found issues it believed the previous operator should have fixed. Some of the problems raised include:

- Fire alarm faults
- Lift issues
- Broken seating
- Damaged glazing
- Faulty toilets
- Poor ventilation
- Damp
- Possible roof cracks
- Machinery at “end of life”

Some were flagged as health and safety risks, meaning urgent action was needed to keep the centre safe and open.

The council has now agreed to let Places carry out the repairs and reclaim the costs by reducing the management fee it pays back to the council. Officers said this is the “most cost-effective” option, but it effectively means residents are picking up the tab.

Why is the council paying?

Under the contract, some repairs fall to the council as landlord responsibilities. Others may be recoverable from former operator GLL, but legal experts warn the council is unlikely to claw back the full amount. GLL has been contacted for comment. [See below for additional reporting.]

The authority plans to dip into its ‘dilapidation’ reserve, a pot of money set aside for building repairs, to cover the shortfall. Officers admit the final cost is still being worked out, but estimate it could reach up to £500,000.

Opposition fury

Councillors have slammed the council for not knowing the state of its own properties.

Cllr **Alex Coley**, member of the Independent group (Ruxley), said: “I’d have hoped that the council as landlord would understand the condition of the leisure centre to establish its potential liability.”

Labour group leader, Cllr **Kate Chinn**, (Court) hit out at the ruling Residents’ Association (RA), calling the situation a “shocking scandal”.

She said: “This secrecy wasn’t about keeping the costs involved from the parties to the negotiations as they already know them. It was about preventing the public from learning how incompetent the RA are.”

She added: “Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) has rightly owned this fiasco, but without realising that his ‘nothing to see’ attitude that council tax payers should expect to be routinely stuck with bills on this scale shows how complacent he is with their money.”

She accused the ruling group of being distracted: “The RA have clearly taken their eye off the ball as they focus on a self-serving attempt to create new parish councils and new roles for themselves.”

Cllr **James Lawrence**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group (College), said the situation shows “the importance of maintaining key properties so they are in good working condition and ensuring the status of our properties is communicated to both councillors and residents in good time.”

Council response

Council leaders defended the decision, saying negotiations are normal during handovers. Councillors Neil Dallen and **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said: “Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred to a new operator, Places Leisure, on 1 October 2025. Since then, we’ve been pleased to see a number of improvements at the centre.

“This marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the leisure centre... including significant investment to upgrade the gym, studios, swimming changing rooms and more, which are already underway.”

They added: “With any handover, it is normal practice for there to be negotiations around works to be carried out which form part of the contract finalisation.”

However, they refused to release further information, saying: “Details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain.”

Places Leisure

A spokesperson said: “Places Leisure took over the operation and management of Rainbow Leisure Centre in partnership with Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 1st October 2025. We are excited to work closely with the Council to implement changes and significant investment at the centre to make a positive impact for the local community.”

Emily Dalton LDRS – the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service

Additional reporting from Epsom and Ewell Times:

In a further twist GLL has supplied Epsom and Ewell Times a response to the issues: *“GLL was proud to partner with Epsom and Ewell Council on the design and opening of Rainbow Leisure Centre over 20 years ago. This innovative and award-winning centre has been extremely successful over the 20 years of GLL’s tenure, engaging millions of local residents in activity, improving their health and wellbeing.*

“GLL is unaware of any legal claim that the Council is looking to bring in relation to the standard of the building on handover, especially as there are set protocols to deal with building handovers prior to any instigation of legal action. As background, the Council undertook, via specialist contractors, a full survey of the building prior to GLL exiting. As is normal in all leisure transfers, items that were identified for [repair or rectification] in that survey for GLL were all completed prior to handover and signed off by the specialist contractors on behalf of the Council. GLL handed the building over to the standard required by the Council and under the contract.”

It is normal practice for Councils as landlords to have rights of periodic entry and inspection of premises it engages contractors to manage. Either the Council was negligent in failing to insert such rights in the contract with GLL or the Council has been negligent over an extended period of years in failing to carry out inspections or to carry out inspections properly.

The Council has made fully public announcements that Places commenced its contract on 1st October 2025. See Epsom and Ewell Times report: Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators. The Information Commissioner has made plain that Council’s cannot evade accountability by claims of ongoing contractual negotiations. The tender process having ended for both GLL and Places means there is little if any financially sensitive information to protect justifying a confidential label on information that exposes probable Council incompetence.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked Epsom and Ewell Borough Council a series of questions about these issues and received the same “nothing to see here” response from Cllr Dallen as obtained by the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) reporter Emily Dalton, as above. The Epsom and Ewell Times has thus submitted to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council formal Freedom of Information Act demands for relevant information.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related reports:

Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators

Gold star at the end of the Rainbow

Pot of gold for Rainbow?

Is Epsom and Ewell getting “proportional representation” under Council shake-up?

14 January 2026



Dear Editor,

I was heartened to read Cllr Eber Kingston’s letter of 9th January. For once, a Resident Association councillor has broken ranks with the ruling Residents’ Association line by publicly disavowing the party’s own sponsored option of creating two community councils to replace Epsom and Ewell Borough Council following Local Government Reorganisation. That departure is to be applauded.

However, I must respectfully challenge the assertion that the current options before us truly trust residents — “the people most qualified to decide what is best for the borough,” as Cllr Kingston rightly characterises them — with a meaningful say. In reality, EEBC hasn’t offered residents any choice beyond:

- * Two community councils (effectively parish/town councils with a precept), or
- * No community councils at all.

If Cllr Kingston has alternative proposals for how local democratic accountability and community decision-making can supplement ten councillors representing East Surrey on the new unitary authority, he has left it far too late for such alternatives to be prepared, costed, and properly considered before EEBC’s much-awaited March 2026 meeting.

It is worth putting the democratic and financial context in sharper focus. At present, EEBC has 36 councillors servicing a modest borough budget of around £10.27 million for 2025/26. In contrast, Surrey County Council’s budget of £1.2641 billion including responsibilities, covering education, highways, social care and more, account for roughly 76 % of the total council tax bill paid by residents, with EEBC receiving only about 10 %.

Under the new arrangements for two unitary authorities— as confirmed by government decision — the Epsom and Ewell area will be represented by 10 councillors on the East Surrey Council, dealing with the vast majority of public services currently under County control. Crude though it is, this means that for the major service budgets now handled at county level, Epsom and Ewell will have significantly greater relative influence than before. Currently, just five county councillors represent the borough’s interests on a much larger Surrey budget; in future, ten unitary councillors will cover roughly half of the former Surrey population’s budget responsibilities.

Yes, it is true that we lose some of the micro-representation previously afforded by a larger cohort of borough councillors on planning and routine community matters — though even now many planning decisions are subject to Government inspectors overruling local decisions on appeal. But on the biggest pots of public spending — education, adult social care, highways, children’s services — residents will likely be better represented proportionately than under the old two-tier county/district system.

So when debating the merits of Neighbourhood Area Committees versus community councils, let us be clear about the alternatives on the table. Both NACs and community councils have limitations and cost implications, and both are artificially constrained by the narrow set of options EEBC has chosen to present. The real democratic choice for residents should be wider than simply more or fewer tiers of parish councils.

If Cllr Kingston truly believes, as he claims, that residents should decide how council tax is spent and how their communities are governed, then let us see a

credible alternative framework— with transparent proposals, budget implications, and democratic accountability — ahead of March. Otherwise, the debate will continue to swirl around consultancy-driven options that neither trust nor empower the people they purport to serve.

Yours faithfully,

Trevor Burt

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From the Cosmos to Commerce: University of Surrey Leads the Way

14 January 2026



The University of Surrey has been showcasing a remarkable breadth of achievement in recent weeks, with major advances announced across fundamental science, international collaboration, digital trade policy and lifetime academic excellence.

From unlocking the origins of the universe's rarest elements, to shaping the future of UK trade infrastructure and celebrating world-leading research careers, the University's latest announcements underline its growing national and international impact.

Unlocking the universe's rarest elements

Surrey scientists are leading a new £215,100 international research project that aims to transform understanding of how chemical elements are formed during extreme cosmic events such as supernovae, neutron-star collisions and X-ray bursts.

Funded by the Royal Society's International Science Partnership Fund, the three-year project brings together researchers from Surrey, Kyushu University and Japan's world-leading RIKEN laboratory. The team will develop and deploy cutting-edge instruments capable of measuring some of the rarest and most unstable atomic nuclei ever studied.

These exotic isotopes do not exist naturally on Earth and can only be created briefly in advanced physics laboratories. By measuring their mass and decay rates for the first time, researchers hope to refine theoretical models of nuclear structure and gain new insight into how the heaviest elements in the universe are formed.

Experiments will take place at RIKEN's Rare-Radioactive Isotope Ring, a unique facility that allows repeated observation of these short-lived nuclei. Surrey researchers will play a central role, leading the design and testing of advanced detector and data-acquisition systems in the UK ahead of the experimental programme in Japan.

The collaboration is also expected to strengthen scientific ties between the UK and Japan and reinforce the UK's position at the forefront of nuclear physics research.

Warning over UK digital trade and border fragmentation

In a very different field, new research from Surrey Business School and the Centre for the Decentralised Digital Economy has issued a stark warning that the UK risks falling behind global competitors in digital trade unless urgent action is taken.

The study argues that the UK's digital border initiatives are fragmented, with no single organisation responsible for coordinating legislation, technology platforms and end-to-end border processes. As a result, businesses face repeated data requests, delays and uncertainty, increasing costs rather than reducing friction.

Researchers examined UK trade and border policies since 2017, including the 2025 UK Border Strategy, recent digital trade legislation and multiple government pilot projects. Drawing on international case studies and academic research, the team proposes a collaborative governance framework to guide reform.

The report calls for the government to give one body a clear mandate to orchestrate policy, digital platforms and data standards across departments. It argues that, with the right leadership, the UK has a window of opportunity to create a new digital "silk road" for trade, enabling trusted data sharing that benefits smaller firms as well as multinationals.

Lifetime achievement recognised in materials science

Surrey's excellence in research was further highlighted by the announcement that Professor Joseph Keddie, Professor of Soft Matter Physics, has been awarded the 2026 Sir Eric Rideal Award for lifetime achievement in colloid and interface science.

Jointly awarded by the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Society of Chemical Industry, the prestigious honour recognises sustained and distinguished contributions to the field. Professor Keddie is internationally known for pioneering work on polymer colloids, sustainable materials and so-called "living materials", with applications ranging from coatings and adhesives to wastewater treatment and bioremediation.

Over a career spanning more than three decades, he has authored more than 150 academic publications, holds multiple patents and co-authored the influential book *Fundamentals of Latex Film Formation*. His work at Surrey has previously been recognised by major awards from both the Institute of Physics and the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Professor Keddie will deliver the Rideal Lecture, titled *More than Watching Paint Dry*, on 8 April 2026, presenting highlights from his research including self-layering coatings and carbon-storing "living paints".

A university with global reach

Taken together, the announcements paint a picture of a university operating at the cutting edge across disciplines: advancing fundamental science on a global stage, influencing national policy debates, and nurturing research careers with lasting international impact.

For Surrey residents, the achievements reinforce the University of Surrey's role not only as a local institution, but as a centre of innovation and expertise with reach far beyond Guildford.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Seven-try storm sinks Epsom and Sutton

14 January 2026



Old Colfeians 44 Sutton & Epsom RFC 22. Saturday 10th January.

The fourth-placed Black & Whites opened their 2026 account at Horn Park against Old Colfeians, who sat one place below them in the league table. Sutton's season has been one of feast or famine — the ecstasy of winning their first four fixtures giving way to the agony of a five-match losing streak — although bonus points in defeat have kept them competitive. Whatever New Year resolutions were made, they did not translate into success on the pitch as Old Colfeians ran in seven tries in a 44-22 victory.

After a week of wild weather, conditions were benign, despite a temporary water cut in the area which thankfully was resolved in time for the teams to shower. There was an early sign of trouble when Sutton were pushed back at the first scrum, although this proved to be a rare moment of dominance by the home pack. Old Colfeians opened the scoring with a penalty from Ollie Burkett. Sutton responded five minutes later when Freddy Bunting kicked to the corner, Ewan McTaggart secured possession and after multiple phases Tom Lennard found winger Kyren Ghumra, who crossed for the opening try. The conversion struck the upright, but Sutton led 5-3.

The hosts soon hit back as centre Louis Baker broke through from 25 metres for the first of his two tries, regaining the lead at 8-5. Sutton replied immediately with what many present judged their try of the season — slick passing down the right wing released Ghumra for his second, nudging the visitors back in front at 10-8. The lead did not last long. A flowing counter-attack, started by full-back Chris Harris, ended with Mylo Mutongwizo finishing in the corner. Another missed conversion left Old Colfeians ahead 13-10.

Sutton pressed again but a sharp interception from Burkett turned defence into attack, leading to a try finished by prop Tom Rameaux. Burkett added the conversion for a 20-10 half-time lead in a fast-paced and entertaining contest.

Sutton were dealt a blow when scrum-half Gareth O'Brien was forced off with concussion, with Tom Lennard taking over his duties. The visitors made a strong start to the second half and were rewarded when McTaggart forced his way over from close range after another line-out move. Once again the conversion was missed, leaving Sutton trailing 20-15 with half an hour to play.

Although Sutton enjoyed spells of possession, Old Colfeians' defence was resolute. When the hosts regained territory, Harris kicked to the corner and the resulting catch-and-drive saw hooker Freddie Holland-Oliver score the bonus-point try. Burkett converted for 27-15 and the home forwards, led by captain Andy O'Malley, began to dominate. O'Malley powered over soon after, stretching the lead to 34-15.

Adam Bibby briefly reignited Sutton hopes with a strong run, but Baker then ran in from 40 metres for his second try to make it 39-15. Sutton did at least secure a valuable bonus point when Tom Lennard took a quick tap from a penalty near the line and Eric Duey emerged from the pile to score. Bunting converted to bring the score to 39-22.

Old Colfeians had the final word when O'Malley crossed again following another forward surge. Burkett missed the conversion but the hosts completed a convincing 44-22 win.

Sutton were very much in contention in the first half, but as the game wore on they were increasingly overpowered by a dominant Colfeians pack that laid the platform for victory. Both sides then enjoyed generous hospitality in the clubhouse, where Horn Park remains a favourite destination for travelling supporters.

Next Saturday Sutton return to Rugby Lane to face Sidcup, who won the reverse fixture 22-12 earlier in the season.

Sutton & Epsom

Bennion, Scott, Bibby, Bunting ©, Ghumra, Lennard, O'Brien, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, McTaggart, Finney, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.

Reps: Howes, Duey & Symonds.

Old Colfeians

Harris, Mutongwizo, Baker, Napper, Spaczil, Burkett, Wylie, Rameaux, Holland-Oliver, Agorioge, O'Malley ©, Collins-Oberman, Enskat, Walker & Amor.

Reps: Correa, Ramdhan & Storey.

John Croysdill

Image courtesy Robin Kennedy from a previous fixture.

Surrey tops Man v FAT contest

14 January 2026



Guildford’s MAN v FAT Football Club has been crowned Community Club of the Year 2025 at the nationwide MAN v FAT Football Awards, recognising its outstanding contribution to improving men’s health and wellbeing.

In Surrey, the MAN v FAT weight loss programme is commissioned by Surrey County Council through the free healthy lifestyle service One You Surrey. The FA-accredited scheme, which also runs in Woking, combines football with structured weight-loss support and is aimed at overweight and obese men with a BMI of 27.5 or above, helping participants lose weight, gain confidence and build friendships.

At each session, players weigh in before taking part in a 30-minute six-a-side football match. Teams receive extra goal bonuses based on their combined weight loss. A team’s match scores and weekly weight-loss totals then contribute to its standing in the club’s league table.

Mark Smithies from the Guildford club said joining had been transformative for him: he has lost weight, improved his fitness and made lasting friendships. He added that the positive, supportive environment has boosted his confidence and mindset, describing the club as “more than just football... a proper community”.

H5 How the programme supports players

Alongside weekly football sessions, MAN v FAT players receive additional support off the pitch, including healthy meal ideas, general fitness tips and access to a bespoke mental health platform through partners JAAQ.

Across the UK, MAN v FAT players have collectively lost more than 800,000 pounds in weight.

H5 Success in Guildford and Woking

The Guildford club meets on Friday evenings at Kings College – Community Sports Hub on Southway and currently has 68 members regularly achieving their weight-loss goals. Over the past twelve months, players at the club have shed more than 34 stone of excess weight, with progress continuing week on week.

The Woking club meets on Monday evenings at the Woking Sportsbox and has supported 40 players to lose a combined 365kg during 2025.

H5 Find out more

Funded places are available for Surrey residents at the Guildford and Woking clubs through Surrey County Council and One You Surrey.

To register, visit manvfat.com/football and search for Guildford or Woking to apply and begin your journey to a healthier 2026.

Surrey County Council



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Epsom and Ewell lags Surrey’s recycling front-runners, new tracker shows

14 January 2026



Surrey’s self-assessment – and what sits behind it

A new “Surrey Waste Tracker” published by the Surrey Environment Partnership (SEP) claims Surrey is one of the best performing areas in England for recycling and low landfill. The tracker uses data for the 2023-24 year and compares Surrey County Council with 28 “similar” waste authorities across England.

SEP reports that 54.5% of Surrey’s total household waste is recycled, reused or composted, placing Surrey joint second out of 29 comparable authorities. Surrey households produced around 445kg of rubbish per home, said to be eighth out of 29 and better than an England average of around 511kg. Just 0.2% of Surrey’s household waste went to landfill, compared with an England average of 5.5%, and 85% of Surrey’s waste is processed in the UK rather than exported.

The tracker does not spell out which 28 other authorities Surrey is being measured against, nor does it cite the exact national datasets used for those comparisons.

How independent national data stacks up

Provisional government waste statistics for 2023-24 show that, across England as a whole, the household recycling rate is around 44%. The same official release reports that 5.5% of local authority-collected waste in England was sent to landfill.

Taken together, these independent figures broadly support SEP’s central message: Surrey’s recycling rate is around ten percentage points higher than the England average, Surrey sends a much smaller share of its waste to landfill than the country as a whole, and Surrey households appear to be producing less residual rubbish than the average English household.

However, the 42.3% “England average” recycling figure quoted on the Surrey Waste Tracker is slightly lower than the 44% national rate reported by government, suggesting SEP may be using a different measure or earlier cut of the same data.

Where Epsom and Ewell sits in the Surrey league

The tracker also breaks down performance by each of Surrey’s 11 district and borough councils, including Epsom and Ewell. For each area it publishes annual rubbish per household (in kg), the proportion of household waste recycled, reused or composted, and the proportion of recycling processed within the UK.

On those measures, **Epsom and Ewell** is a low performer within Surrey, but well behind the best-performing districts.

Recycling rate: Epsom and Ewell recycles, reuses or composts 52.1% of its household waste. This places it ninth out of the 11 Surrey districts and boroughs on the recycling measure, while Surrey Heath leads the county on 58.9%, with Guildford and Tandridge close behind.

Rubbish per household: Epsom and Ewell households produce 402.3kg of rubbish per year. That is better than Elmbridge and Spelthorne, but still ninth out of 11 when ranked from lowest to highest residual waste. Surrey Heath again tops this table with 341.2kg per household.

How much recycling stays in the UK: Only 63.7% of Epsom and Ewell’s collected recycling is processed within the UK, the lowest share in Surrey. Several councils send a much higher proportion of recyclables to UK facilities, including Reigate and Banstead, Guildford and Tandridge.

Surrey district and borough waste league table, 2023-24

Based on the Surrey Waste Tracker’s published data, the picture across the 11 local areas is as follows, ranked by recycling rate from highest to lowest:

Rank (recycling)	District / Borough	Rubbish per household (kg)	Proportion recycled / reused / composted (%)	Proportion of recycling processed in UK (%)
1	Surrey Heath	341.2	58.9	76.8
2	Guildford	347.5	57.9	84.6
3	Tandridge	361.5	57.8	84.2
4	Waverley	350.0	57.0	75.3
5	Mole Valley	362.1	56.4	72.2
6	Woking	348.1	56.4	73.1
7	Elmbridge	407.5	54.2	72.6
8	Reigate and Banstead	381.2	54.2	96.2
9	Epsom and Ewell	402.3	52.1	63.7
10	Runnymede	386.4	46.8	71.5
11	Spelthorne	439.3	44.5	70.7

On this reading, Epsom and Ewell recycles a larger share of its waste than the national average, but less than eight of its ten Surrey neighbours, produces more rubbish per household than most Surrey areas, and sends the smallest proportion of its recycling to UK plants.

Who owns the Surrey Environment Partnership?

The Surrey Waste Tracker is published by the Surrey Environment Partnership, which is a partnership between Surrey County Council and the 11 district and borough councils. SEP is therefore not an external watchdog but a joint project of the councils whose performance it reports on.

The tracker draws on data that councils are legally required to report to central government through the WasteDataFlow system, which the government then uses to produce national statistics. However, it does not identify the 28 “similar areas” Surrey is compared with, nor the criteria for including them, and it does not explicitly reference the government publications from which national averages appear to be taken.

For residents in Epsom and Ewell, the Surrey Waste Tracker offers a useful snapshot of local performance within a strong-performing county, while also raising questions of transparency and comparability. The extent to which the borough can close the gap with Surrey’s recycling leaders, and keep more of its recycling treatment within the UK, is likely to remain a live policy issue for years ahead.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Image: Landfill site in UK by M J Richardson CC BY-SA 2.0

Since publication of the above report the Surrey Environmental Partnership has issued the following helpful clarification:

Unfortunately, there was an error in the number of authorities that we compared Surrey with. The report originally listed that there were 29 similar authorities, when in fact it was 27. This has now been amended on our website – Surrey Environment Partnership – Surrey Waste Tracker. The authorities that Surrey compares to are the other waste disposal authorities in England.

The article also mentions a discrepancy between the figure of 42.3% that we used for England’s recycling rate compared to the figure of 44.0%. Just to clarify that 44.0% is England’s recycling rate for the calendar year of 2023 whereas 42.3% is England’s recycling rate for 2023-24, which is the period that our report covers.

Finally, with regard to the source of the data, the source is Defra’s publicly available data, which can be found here – Local authority collected waste management – annual results – GOV.UK.

We have made a note to include the above level of detail in Surrey Waste Tracker reports from hereon.

Long serving Epsom Councillor blasts LGR and NACs

14 January 2026



Dear Editor

I am not sure where your Editorial writer of 6th January 2026 gets their information on SCC’s pilot project Neighbourhood Area Committees (Parish power, democratic ideals — and the Residents’ Association dilemma), but NAC’s are certainly not the answer to the proposed LGR centralisation of local government and are far away from the concept of local democracy.

But before I address that, let’s just step back a bit and see how we got here. The Government had no electoral mandate to abolish SCC and Surrey’s Districts and Boroughs. And even if a vague manifesto reference to the reform of local governments counts as legitimate, the Leader of SCC had no mandate to use his Executive power to drag all of Surrey’s local authorities into a rushed and centralising new local government structure.

The Government and Tim Oliver also cancelled the May 2025 local County Council election, denying residents themselves of the chance to express their view on this change, via the ballot box. That said, residents used a different mechanism to say what they thought. The results of the Government’s own public consultation on the Unitary Options, published in October, showed that 51% of respondents expressed support for the three Unitary Option and only 19% favoured SCC’s two Unitary option, with 56% strongly opposed to it. Yet the Government decided it knows better.

The outcome is that we won’t have the devolution of power as promised under LGR but, instead, the centralisation of local government upwards and into two Unitary Authorities covering populations over ½ million. And in my Division, covering Ewell Court, Auriol, and Cuddington, just two Unitary councillors will replace the current eight local councillors with the expectation (I suppose) that this is sufficient to ensure that our residents needs and expectations will still be adequately met.

And this is where the Government’s concept of Neighbourhood Area Committees comes into play. How ironic that, having realised Unitary Authorities will have nothing “local” about them, the Government decides (fully supported by the ruling party at SCC) that they will also impose what will fill that void.

Your Editorial seems quite keen on these. They write *“These advisory bodies bring together local councillors, police, NHS, voluntary sector leaders and community stakeholders — arguably, the very people most qualified to inform decisions on community priorities.”*

However – and given that I am a Residents’ Association councillor you probably won’t be surprised at this – I think the people most qualified to determine local priorities and what their council tax should be spent on, are residents and council taxpayers themselves. Not an unelected quango with a small minority of residents working to an agenda determined by the Unitary Authority. Neighbourhood Area Committees therefore do not pass the tests of democratic local government, representation of the people, nor the ability for local people and communities to influence local outcomes.

Your Editorial also states that NACs come *“at minimal administrative cost.”* I am not sure that’s a given if it’s only based on SCC piloting four NACs. If introduced by the East Surrey Unitary there could 36 or more of them. And how long will it take before the Police, NHS, and Fire Service, for example, realise that that simply cannot resource every NAC and every meeting in Surrey.

So, I do not support the NAC option. It is not local, it is not democratic, and it excludes the voice of most residents. But neither do I support the Town Council and precept model which will add a further tax burden on residents alongside any new elected Mayor’s annual precept, in order to run allotments and not much else.

We need to look at options such as providing Unitary Councillors, individually or jointly in their localities, with funding to allocate locally. We need more local engagement and consultations on the introduction of school streets, speed limits and no verge parking zones and more. We should increase opportunities for community asset transfers enabling communities take over council assets that are better run by those who will use them. And we should undertake more co-designing with residents and users of local services and facilities, to better reflect their needs and aspirations.

So, going forward, if I get the chance to influence the local arrangements, it won’t be to install a quango of unelected public servants and self-selected individuals, but it will be introducing localised structures and financial decision making to ensure that our residents are able to influence the important local choices and funding allocations that affect their lives.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Eber Kington – (RA Surrey County Councillor Ewell Court, Auriol and Cuddington and former RA Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor)

Editor’s note: Epsom and Ewell Times received its published information about Neighbour Area Committees and the cost of running 16 meetings of pilots direct from Surrey County Council’s communications team.

Related letters and editorial

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Epsom and Ewell’s Local Democracy Debate: What’s at Stake as Consultation Enters Phase Two

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Epsom Hospital faces flu challenge

14 January 2026



Hospitals serving Epsom and Ewell are facing one of their toughest starts to a year in recent memory, with dozens of beds taken up by flu patients and others closed because of infection control, as winter illnesses surge across the country.

As of Sunday, 45 beds across St George’s, Epsom and St Helier hospitals were occupied by patients with influenza, according to the St George’s, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals and Health Group. At the same time, further beds have had to be taken out of use due to flu and norovirus outbreaks, reducing the system’s overall capacity just as demand is rising.

The combination of cold weather, widespread winter viruses and a growing number of patients needing specialist treatment has created what NHS leaders locally describe as a “bleak” start to the new year.

Elaine Clancy, Group Chief Nurse for St George’s, Epsom and St Helier, said hospitals across the group were seeing “some very sick patients” as winter illnesses and low temperatures take their toll. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking flu is just a bad cold,” she said. “These figures show the infection can make people seriously ill, and I’d urge people to take steps to ensure they and their loved ones don’t suffer.”

A national problem, not just local

The pressure on Epsom and St Helier reflects a wider national trend. NHS England has warned that socialising over Christmas and New Year is likely to have fuelled a rebound in flu, Covid-19 and other winter viruses, with senior figures cautioning that the worst of the season is “far from over”.

Across England, hospitals are again reporting high numbers of admissions for respiratory illness, alongside continued demand from people with complex medical needs who are more vulnerable in cold weather. The knock-on effect is felt most sharply in accident and emergency departments, where delays grow when wards are full and patients cannot be moved on.

Public health experts have long warned that flu remains a serious illness, particularly for older people, pregnant women and those with underlying conditions. In bad seasons, it contributes to thousands of excess deaths nationally, even though it is often dismissed as minor.

Norovirus, meanwhile, spreads rapidly in hospitals and care settings, forcing wards or bays to close for deep cleaning, further reducing available beds at precisely the moment they are most needed.

What people can do

Local NHS leaders are urging residents to take simple but effective steps to reduce the spread of infection and help protect the health service. These include getting vaccinated against flu if eligible, washing hands regularly, staying at home if unwell, and avoiding contact with vulnerable people when displaying symptoms. Keeping homes warm – ideally at 18°C or above in key rooms – and wrapping up when going outdoors also helps reduce the risk of illness.

People are also being asked to use health services appropriately, so that emergency departments remain available for those in urgent need. NHS 111, which is available online and by phone 24 hours a day, can direct people to the right service, while community pharmacists can advise on many minor illnesses and treatments.

Residents are encouraged to check on neighbours, friends and family who may be vulnerable, to make sure they have food, medication and adequate heating during the cold snap.

With flu and winter viruses still circulating widely, health leaders say the coming weeks will be critical — both for hospitals trying to manage demand, and for communities doing their part to keep themselves and others safe.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related report:

Epsom Hospital braces for flu spike

Call to join the merry Morris Men of St Mary's Ewell

14 January 2026



The friendly team of Ewell St Mary's Morris Men are holding an open day for anyone who would like to try out a bit of Morris Dancing. No experience needed.

Morris Dancing is a very old British tradition going back more than 600 years and whilst some people enjoy the colour, the cheerful music, the fun and whole spectacle, they sometimes feel a bit nervous to actually try it, this open day is an ideal opportunity, no audience, just a lot of very friendly people. Give it a try, there's nothing to lose, and it might just be that thing that ticks your box. It's Free, it's Open to all and there's no commitment

There are many reasons to try out Morris Dancing and if you asked a hundred different Morris Dancers you would get a hundred different reasons, however these are some of the more common reasons.

It is a very old tradition and should be supported

It keeps people fit and trim It is fun The people are all friendly It beats boredom Any age can do it

2-4pm Saturday 17th January, Bourne Hall in Spring Street, Ewell Village KT17 1UF is on the 406, 293 bus routes and has plenty of Car Parking available. Ewell West, and Ewell East railway stations are also nearby.

Everyone welcome, from Epsom, Cheam, Ashted, Sutton, Malden, in fact anywhere. Just come along. On Saturday 17th January.

Musicians wishing to try the music are also welcome, again, no experience required.

More information

Website - <https://ewellmorris.co.uk>

email - contact@ewellmorris.co.uk

Facebook - [ewellstmarymorris](https://www.facebook.com/ewellstmarymorris)

Alan Greenwood

Epsom lamppost flags: symbol of pride — or cause of anxiety?

14 January 2026



Across parts of Epsom and Ewell, the appearance of Union Jack flags tied to lampposts has prompted sharply differing reactions. For some residents, the flag

remains a symbol of shared identity and national belonging. For others, the manner of their sudden arrival — often without permission and fixed to public infrastructure — has caused unease, sparking wider anxieties about division, ownership of public space, and the meaning of patriotism in modern Britain.

In September 2025 Surrey County Council restated its position on flags and attachments to street furniture, reminding residents that anything fixed to a lamppost or painted on a public highway requires formal consent. The council emphasised safety considerations for drivers, pedestrians and maintenance crews, and said unauthorised attachments may be removed during inspections. Residents wishing to display flags on public land are advised to apply in advance through established procedures. The council was clear, however, that anyone may fly a flag from their own property if they wish to do so.

The debate has not only been technical or regulatory. One local resident, writing to the *Epsom and Ewell Times*, described attempting to remove some of the flags in their neighbourhood and being confronted in the process. Their concern was less about flags as symbols, and more about how — and by whom — they were placed, and whether they were being used to signal exclusion rather than unity. The writer reflected on the way social and political polarisation in recent years has shaped how national imagery is read, and expressed frustration at what they saw as a lack of clarity over which authority is responsible for removing unauthorised items from street furniture.

Others in the borough have reacted very differently, seeing the flags as benign expressions of pride, or as gestures intended to lift spirits at a time of economic and social uncertainty. Some residents have argued that the Union Jack should not be regarded as belonging to any one political tradition, recalling moments when people across the country — including at national sporting events and during major civic occasions — have gathered beneath it without controversy.

That broader question — who “owns” the flag — has recurred throughout modern political history. When crowds waved the Union Jack outside Downing Street on the night of Labour’s 1997 election victory, commentators spoke of the centre-left “reclaiming” national symbolism from the political right, attempting to make it inclusive rather than exclusive. Others have suggested that opportunities were later missed to develop a more layered sense of identity, for example by flying the European Union flag alongside the Union Jack on public buildings, as was commonplace in many EU member states. For some, that dual display might have normalised a shared British and European identity; for others it would itself have been contentious. The difficulty of striking a balance illustrates how strongly flags can be read in different ways.

In Epsom and Ewell, the present concerns appear to rest less on the flag itself than on process, tone and consent. The sudden appearance of flags on lampposts — without clear identification of who has installed them and without permission from the asset-owning authority — has left some residents feeling unsettled or excluded, while leaving councils fielding questions about responsibility and enforcement. The practicalities are not trivial: removing items at height may require equipment, contractor time and public money.

One constructive suggestion arising from local discussions is that the right of individuals to fly a flag from their own homes could be matched by a more open and confident approach from civic bodies, schools, churches, voluntary groups and local businesses — flying the Union Jack from their own buildings in clearly identifiable and lawful ways, and on agreed occasions. In that model, the flag becomes visible as a symbol belonging to all, rather than as an anonymous street-level intervention that some interpret as a political statement.

Another proposal is for clearer published guidance from the relevant authorities — setting out who owns which assets, how permission can be sought, what safety standards apply, and how residents may raise concerns or objections. Transparency about due process may help reduce tension, even where views differ about meaning and symbolism.

What the current debate in Epsom and Ewell perhaps most clearly reveals is that flags still carry emotional weight — capable of reassuring some while unsettling others. Between those positions lies a space for thoughtful discussion about how shared symbols are used in public places, and how a sense of belonging can be fostered without causing anxiety to neighbours who may read them differently.

Sam Jones – Reporter



If you have a considered view on this topic feel free to write to The Epsom and Ewell Times.

Related report:

Surrey County Council flags up the flag issue