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The Man Who Signed It, Chaired It, and Wouldn’t Explain It: Six Months of Silence Over Rainbow’s £500,000 Bill

11 July 2026



Six months after Epsom and Ewell Borough Council quietly authorised the use of its reserves to cover a dilapidations bill of up to £500,000 at the Rainbow Leisure Centre, the six basic questions this paper put to the Councillor who approved that decision remain unanswered. Not because the council disputes the facts. Not because litigation prevents comment. But because, first, it said the matter was commercially sensitive; then, once an election was called, it said the law forbade a response; and now that the election is over, it has offered residents a statement about gym upgrades instead.

The common thread through every stage of this story is one councillor: **Neil Dallen** (RA Town), Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee, who signed off the original urgent decision, chaired the meeting where questions about it were cut off, and has twice found a procedural reason not to say how the bill arose.

A smooth handover, on paper

Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred from its operator of 22 years, GLL, to Places Leisure on 1 October 2025. The council’s own account, recorded in the Urgent Decision document later obtained by this paper, describes an unremarkable changeover: no break in service, a deal offering “significantly more income than the Council had been receiving,” and a pre-handover check by an external consultant intended to confirm the building “would be handed back in good condition.” That check, the document specifies, “was not an invasive analysis.”

Within weeks, Places identified a long list of problems: faults in fire alarms, lifts, seating, glazing, sanitaryware, ventilation, damp, possible roof cracks, and machinery officers now describe as at “end of life.” Some were flagged as health and safety risks requiring immediate action.

December: a £500,000 estimate, marked not for publication

On 17 December 2025, under the reference DEC 158, the council took an Urgent Decision — a mechanism used when a matter cannot wait for the ordinary committee cycle — authorising its Section 151 officer to finalise dilapidations negotiations with Places. The document, marked “OFFICIAL SENSITIVE – NOT FOR PUBLICATION” and exempted under paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, put the likely cost at up to £500,000, to be met initially from the council’s dilapidations reserve and recovered from GLL only “in due course” — with the same document conceding the council “must accept that it will not be able to recover the Places claim in its entirety.” Cllr Dallen was consulted as committee chair and recorded his view in two words: “Happy to support.”

The decision stayed confidential until this paper obtained and published it in January.

January to March: leak, backlash, and the first stonewall

The story prompted sharp criticism from opposition councillors, who accused the ruling Residents’ Association of secrecy and complacency. The council’s public response — attributed to Dallen and Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village)— framed the transfer as “an exciting new chapter” and declined to discuss “terms and financial arrangements” as commercially sensitive. GLL, for its part, maintained it had fixed everything flagged by the pre-handover survey and handed the building back to the required standard.

This paper submitted a Freedom of Information request on 13 January seeking the lease’s inspection clauses, any log of landlord inspections or condition surveys since 2003, records identifying the backlog and its cost, and evidence of when councillors were first told. The council took over two months to respond, and released only a handful of lease clauses.

At the Strategy and Resources Committee on 27 January, Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) pressed Dallen, as chair, on why the decision had been kept confidential and whether a public-interest test had ever been carried out. Dallen confirmed he had supported both the decision and its confidential status, then closed the matter down: “It is my meeting… I have made a decision there is going to be no further comments.”

The survey that two accounts can’t both describe

A letter to this paper from Cllrs Ames and **James Lawrence** (Independent College), following the Audit and Scrutiny Committee’s March meeting, surfaced a direct conflict in how the council has characterised the pre-handover survey. The Assistant Director for Corporate Services told that committee that consultants Carter Jonas had been commissioned to carry out “a very detailed survey of the whole leisure centre.” But in June 2025, recommending the Places contract to the Strategy and Resources Committee, the same officer described the exercise as a stock condition report commissioned

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merely to “inform the procurement process,” on the basis that the council “has been very satisfied” with how the centre had been run and that it was, “overall,” in good condition.

Both descriptions cannot comfortably be true of the same piece of work — and neither sits easily with the Urgent Decision document’s own characterisation of the survey as “not an invasive analysis.” This paper has been unable to establish which account is accurate, because the council has refused to release the survey itself, citing legal professional privilege.

April and May: an election as a shield

As the 7th May East Surrey Unitary Council elections approached — in which Dallen was himself a candidate — the council declined to answer a detailed list of questions this paper put to him on 24 March, citing Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, which bars councils from publishing material designed to influence political support. Independent expert opinion obtained by this paper, from **Nathan Elver**y, former Chief Executive of Croydon Council, concluded the questions posed were “factual in character” and that a response “would not constitute political publicity within the meaning of the Act” — the council, he noted, was “not being asked to promote a political position; it is being asked to account for its stewardship of public funds.” Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) relied on the same provision to avoid unrelated questions about a separate governance matter.

A subsequent FOI request established that the decision to invoke Section 2 in Dallen’s case involved the Chief Executive, the Monitoring Officer, senior communications officers, and Dallen himself — yet the council said it held no record of the legal or governance advice behind that decision. The guidance document it pointed to as its basis, meanwhile, explicitly permits councils to continue normal business and to publish factual information during an election period.

Dallen finally responded on 18 May, twelve days after polling. The response answered none of the substantive questions this paper had posed two months earlier about how the dilapidations arose; it repeated that “details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive.”

June: privilege claimed, release refused

On 18 June the council upheld its refusal to disclose the 2025 inspection report or any related backlog, dilapidation or financial exposure documents, now citing Section 42 of the Freedom of Information Act — legal professional privilege — on the basis that litigation was “a live issue” and the council was “already talking to our lawyers.” This paper’s request for internal review had argued the exemption was being applied as a blanket, rather than document by document, and that routine inspection and survey material does not become privileged merely because litigation is later contemplated. The council’s review upheld the original refusal in full. This paper is now preparing a complaint to the Information Commissioner’s Office.

29 June to 6 July: the same six questions, and no answers

With the election well behind it, this paper wrote to Dallen again on 29 June, posing six direct questions: did GLL hide the dilapidations; did the handover survey fail to report them accurately; is the scale of the dilapidations agreed by the council; did they arise in the gap between survey and occupation; is there another explanation; and which parties are under consideration for legal action. The council’s communications team acknowledged the request that evening and asked for a deadline — a response was received on 6 July, attributed to Dallen. It addressed none of the six questions. It described the transfer as “the beginning of an exciting new chapter,” referenced planned investment in the gym, studios and changing rooms, and reiterated that financial arrangements remain commercially sensitive.

Ames states: “”The holes in the administration’s story are so big they do not need an expert survey to locate them. It is obvious that it used the urgent decision process to cover up its own incompetence and negligence and that it has continued the cover-up ever since. When the issue comes before the Audit and Scrutiny Committee next week, I expect the administration to use every trick in the book – plus a few new ones – to hide the truth from residents, but I and other councillors are determined not to let this happen.”

Where this stands

Four explanations remain on the table for how a “very detailed” — or, on the council’s alternative account, non-invasive — pre-handover survey and an uneventful transfer became a £500,000 liability within three months: that GLL was not straight about the building’s condition; that the council failed to inspect or enforce its rights as landlord across more than two decades; that the survey’s scope was too narrow to catch what mattered; or that Places has overstated what it found. Each implicates a different party, and each is precisely why the underlying documents matter.

What is not contested is the pattern: a councillor who authorised the spending, chaired the meeting where it was challenged, and has since given two different procedural reasons — commercial sensitivity, then election law — for not answering the same six questions about how it happened.

Residents who ultimately fund the shortfall are still waiting for a plain account of why.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports:

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Epsom Playhouse to embrace heat pumps and trees to be felled – a planning committee’s night’s work

11 July 2026



Last night Councillors unanimously approved the council’s own application to replace ageing air-conditioning plant at Epsom Playhouse with a modern heat pump system, in a decision expected to cut the theatre’s reliance on fossil fuels.

The scheme, brought to committee because the council itself is the applicant, will see five redundant roof-mounted air conditioning condensers and a gas-fired boiler removed from the roof of the Ashley Avenue theatre and replaced with six air source heat pumps and four condenser units. The new equipment will sit within a 1.8-metre acoustic screen to control noise.

Presenting the report, a planning officer told the committee the works would modernise the Playhouse’s building services and “contribute towards the council’s net-zero objectives, and reduce the building’s reliance on fossil fuels.” Because the theatre adjoins the Grade II listed 47-51 South Street and sits next to the Epsom Town Conservation Area, officers had assessed the impact on the setting of those heritage assets, concluding it would cause “less than substantial harm” — but that this harm was outweighed by the public benefit of the energy efficiency improvements.

The council’s Environmental Health Officer raised no objection, subject to a condition requiring a report confirming noise from the new plant does not exceed 37 dB — measured at the nearest habitable window, at neighbouring properties including 39 South Street.

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) asked officers whether any images were available of how visible the new acoustic screening would be from street level. The officer explained that although the fencing would stand 1.8 metres high in total, most of it would sit behind the existing roof parapet, meaning only around 1.3 metres would be visible — and only from the Ashley Avenue side of the building, a route she described as “a public thoroughfare, but not well used.”

As a verbal update, members were told Surrey County Council’s Highway Authority had raised no objection, and the scheme had received support from the Theatres Trust.

Following the questions, the application was approved unanimously subject to the conditions and informatives set out in the officers’ report — including a requirement that the equipment be removed within a month of any future cessation of use, to protect the setting of the neighbouring listed building.

Drummond Gardens: committee refuses to fell veteran oak and three poplars, approves loss of six other protected trees

The most contentious item of the evening concerned an application to fell ten trees protected by Tree Preservation Orders at Drummond Gardens, a 1930s apartment block off Christ Church Mount, after the block’s managing agents argued the trees were causing subsidence damage to the building.

The application sought consent to fell four English oaks within the private grounds of Drummond Gardens, and six Lombardy poplars in the adjoining, council-owned Long Grove Park. Following a lengthy and detailed presentation from the council’s Tree Officer, members voted to approve felling of six of the ten trees, refuse felling of the remaining four, and instead require substantial crown reduction pruning of those four as a compromise measure.

A long-running subsidence dispute

The officer explained that Drummond Gardens has “a long history of building movement,” with cracking on the building’s west-facing wall having worsened in recent years, most severely around flats 26 to 31. A potential insurance claim was

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first notified to the council in 2020, but was deferred at the time because the trees involved were protected and there was insufficient evidence — including missing structural engineering and level-monitoring data — to justify their removal. That evidence has since been gathered, including a structural engineer's report, drainage surveys, and building level monitoring carried out between 2021 and 2024.

He told members the building's foundations are shallow — between 45 and 68 centimetres deep in most places, save for a section towards the south-west corner that was partially underpinned to a depth of two to three metres in 1995. He explained that foundations of this shallow depth are "inadequate by modern standards" on clay soil, particularly where trees are nearby, though he noted that "many properties with shallow foundations on clay coexist with trees without suffering subsidence."

Root samples recovered during site investigations were not starch-tested, meaning there is no scientific confirmation of whether they were alive at the time they were dug up — a gap in the evidence that came up more than once during member questions.

Tree-by-tree recommendations

The assessment, illustrated with photographs of each tree, distinguished between:

- **Oaks T5 and T6** — two middle-aged oaks close to the point of greatest recorded building movement. Mr Young said these were "clearly implicated in causing subsidence damage," noting that even after a neighbouring oak was removed in 2020, level monitoring still showed a seasonal pattern of movement associated with these two trees. Because they are still young enough to grow significantly larger, he judged the future risk to be high and recommended felling.
- **Oak T12** — a small, suppressed specimen tucked behind the veteran oak, recommended for felling as being of low amenity value.
- **Oak T9** — a "transitionary veteran" oak estimated to be around 160 years old, likely a survivor of the field-boundary hedgerow that predates Drummond Gardens itself. Mr Young recommended this tree be retained, explaining that because the tree pre-dates the building, its long-term extraction of moisture from the clay soil may already have caused the ground — and the building above it — to settle to a lower level than it would otherwise sit at. Felling the tree now, he warned, risks the reverse effect: the ground swelling back upwards ("heave") as the soil rehydrates, potentially causing fresh damage. He noted the tree shows signs of naturally "retrenching" — dying back at the crown and roots as it ages — which may explain readings showing the building had actually risen slightly over the past winter. His recommendation was crown reduction rather than felling.
- **Lombardy poplars T22, T23 and T24** — recommended for felling. These are the three poplars closest to the corner of the building where subsidence has been recorded, and Mr Young noted they also have decay at old "topping" points from previous pruning, reducing their safe life expectancy and increasing the risk of branch failure onto the more open part of the garden nearby.
- **Poplars T20, T21 and T25** — recommended for retention with substantial crown reduction (cutting back the canopy by around a third), rather than felling. Mr Young said building movement at this end of the site was slight, "within building tolerance," and that there was no clear evidence any single poplar was responsible for seasonal movement.

Member questions

Before discussion began, Chair Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) noted for the record that he — and, he believed, other members — had been contacted directly by the Drummond Gardens Property Group, but stressed the committee was approaching the item "with an open mind."

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) asked whether the council would be financially liable if the committee's decision were followed but further damage subsequently occurred. Head of Development Management and Planning Enforcement, confirmed that in principle it could be, "but they would need to do additional work to prove that." Cllr Dallen also queried how much weight the committee should give to the council's financial exposure in reaching what would normally be a purely planning judgement. The officer confirmed this was a legitimate material consideration in this case, given "the financial risk to the council… could be significant, depending on the extent of works that are required to the building."

Cllr **James Lawrence** (Independent College) questioned the internal consistency of the recommendation, noting that Oak T9 sat close to boreholes where oak roots had been recovered — comparable evidence, he suggested, to that used to justify felling T5 and T6 — and that T9 did not show the hollowing typically associated with veteran trees. He also queried whether the level of crown reduction proposed for the poplars was proportionate, given it would need to be repeated regularly and would itself reduce the trees' amenity value. Mr Young responded that the key distinction was vigour: T5 and T6 remain in active growth and have significant capacity to expand their root systems further, whereas T9, as an ageing tree past its physiological peak, was more likely to be naturally reducing its water demand rather than increasing it. He added that without DNA root testing, it was not possible to say definitively which poplars' roots lay beneath the building, and that felling all six risked being "quite a scorched earth approach."

Cllr Alison Kelly asked what risk of heave would arise if the committee took a "wholesale" approach and approved felling of all ten trees, and whether that would carry legal liability. The tree officer explained the heave risk applied specifically to the veteran oak, T9, because of its age relative to the building, but not materially to the younger oaks or the poplars,

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which post-date or are roughly contemporary with the building's construction and would not have caused the ground to subside below its original level.

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) praised the report as "an excellent, well-written report, well-researched, well-argued, factually based," noting that his initial assumption — that the tree officer was simply recommending wholesale felling — had not survived a proper reading of the evidence. Vice-Chair Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) echoed the praise for the report's thoroughness, and asked whether it was coincidental that the two highest-value trees on the council's own amenity valuation (T9 and T20) were also the two recommended for retention. Mr Young said the correlation was not the basis for his recommendation; rather, T20 and the other retained poplars back onto a more sheltered part of the group, whereas T22–T24 sit closer to an open area of garden where a falling branch would have nowhere else to land.

Responding to a question from the Chair about future monitoring, the officer confirmed that if building movement continued despite the works being carried out, officers would review whether other, currently unimplicated trees might be responsible. He confirmed that ongoing level monitoring would be carried out by the private landowner's own structural engineer, not the council.

Decision

The committee voted to approve the officers' recommendation in full: refusing consent to fell Oak T9 and Poplars T20, T21 and T25, on the grounds of insufficient evidence of a direct causal link to the subsidence and the harm their loss would cause to environmental quality and amenity; and approving felling of Oaks T5, T6 and T12 and Poplars T22, T23 and T24, together with crown reduction works to the four retained trees, subject to conditions.

Officers' report put a figure on what was at stake: felling all ten trees would have represented a loss of public amenity valued, using the industry-standard CAVAT (Capital Asset Value for Amenity Trees) methodology, at £954,480. The committee's part-refusal reduces that loss to £387,818.

Upcoming applications

Members briefly noted a report listing applications likely to come before the committee in September, including a called-in application at Langley Bottom Farm concerning a variation to affordable housing obligations, a residential care home proposed south of Oak Glade, and a 48-dwelling scheme across two flat buildings at Swail House, Ashley Road. A site visit to Swail House has already been requested and will be arranged ahead of that meeting.

Cllr Alison Kelly raised a query about tree and ground-levelling works she had observed while cycling past a site off Christ Church Road, near Oak Glade, asking whether it involved any protected trees. An officer said she understood the activity related to dormouse survey work, which requires regular checking of monitoring tubes, though officers agreed to look into the specific site and confirm whether any tree works taking place required scrutiny.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Surrey vehicle theft charge rate among lower-performing forces, figures show

11 July 2026



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Surrey Police recorded 1,551 thefts or unauthorised takings of motor vehicles in 2025, with charges or summonses recorded in 34 cases, according to Home Office figures analysed by the Liberal Democrats.

That represents a charge or summons rate of 2.19 per cent. In 1,150 cases — 74.15 per cent of the total — the recorded outcome was that the investigation had been completed with no suspect identified.

The figures put Surrey in the lower half of police forces in England and Wales for the proportion of vehicle-theft cases resulting in a charge or summons, but not at the very bottom.

Excluding the British Transport Police, Surrey's 2.19 per cent rate was the 12th lowest among 43 territorial police forces. The overall England and Wales rate in the data was 2.45 per cent.

Surrey was also among the worse-performing forces for cases ending without a suspect being identified. Its 74.15 per cent figure was the eighth highest of the 43 territorial forces, although it was slightly below the England and Wales overall figure of 75.90 per cent.

In terms of the number of vehicle thefts, Surrey sat around the middle of the national table: its 1,551 recorded offences made it the 20th highest force area out of 43. The highest totals were recorded by the Metropolitan Police, with 31,534 offences, followed by West Midlands Police with 12,979.

Among Surrey's neighbouring and nearby force areas, Sussex had a lower charge rate of 1.47 per cent, Hampshire 1.80 per cent and Hertfordshire 1.91 per cent. Thames Valley recorded 2.45 per cent and Kent 2.46 per cent. Surrey's proportion of cases with no suspect identified was higher than in Thames Valley, where the figure was 64.22 per cent, and Kent, at 70.48 per cent, but lower than Sussex's 80.02 per cent and Hertfordshire's 77.42 per cent.

Helen Maguire, Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom and Ewell, said the statistics showed that too few vehicle thieves were being brought to justice.

She said: "Across Surrey, people rely on their cars to get to work, take their kids to school, and get themselves to the doctors and other essential services. It is completely unacceptable that 1,551 individuals and families in our county have had their vehicles stolen, with so few of those responsible ever brought to justice.

"How can we expect to deter would-be thieves from stealing people's cars when so few criminals are actually being charged by Surrey Police? The Government is asleep at the wheel and people in Surrey are paying the price.

"We urgently need to restore proper community policing to tackle car theft. For too long forces have been left overstretched and underfunded, without the resources they need to respond."

The Liberal Democrats are calling for more neighbourhood policing and for a specialist National Crime Agency team to bring together automatic number plate recognition data, insurance records, border intelligence and information from police forces to target organised vehicle-crime networks.

The figures relate to the offence category "theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle". A charge or summons is one recorded outcome; cases may also have other outcomes not shown in the comparison.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Epsom Council leader's delayed response to additional local government layer initiative

11 July 2026



Dalton says Surrey devolution letter was non-binding and rooted in Council's 2025 vote

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council leader Councillor Hannah Dalton has said her decision to sign a letter supporting exploration of a new Surrey-wide "Foundation Strategic Authority" was based on the Council's previous backing for local government reorganisation and the prospect of a future mayoral strategic authority.

The explanation follows questions raised by Epsom & Ewell Times over why Cllr Dalton signed the Expression of Interest

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without the matter first being referred back to the full Council.

Earlier attempts to obtain an answer were met with references to election-period restrictions, prompting criticism that the Council was avoiding a straightforward question about the authority under which its leader had acted.

In a response supplied to EET, and attributed to Cllr Dalton, the Council said the background lay in the Government's English Devolution White Paper, published on 16 December 2024.

It said that, at a full Council meeting on 6 May 2025, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council agreed to support a proposal for local government reorganisation in Surrey. The proposal envisaged a future Mayoral Strategic Authority for Surrey, led by an elected mayor and intended to unlock the Government's wider devolution offer.

Cllr Dalton said the Council and other Surrey authorities were now working on the reorganisation process and had recently been invited by the Government to explore a possible Foundation Strategic Authority.

The Council describes this as an intermediate stage towards fuller devolution. It says the letter signed by Cllr Dalton was a "non-binding Expression of Interest", intended only to keep open the possibility that the proposed new East Surrey and West Surrey unitary councils could later explore creating such an authority.

The response states: "It did not commit the Council, confer obligations upon it, or determine any future course of action."

It adds that any formal decision would follow a statutory consultation.

The answer clarifies the Council's position that Cllr Dalton did not require a new Council resolution before signing the letter, because the authority relied upon was the Council's broad 2025 endorsement of a reorganisation proposal which contemplated a Surrey mayoral strategic authority.

However, it is likely to leave open the political question of whether that earlier approval was sufficiently specific to authorise support for this particular Government initiative, especially where the letter was signed in the name of the Borough Council rather than simply as a contribution to exploratory discussions between Surrey leaders.

A Foundation Strategic Authority is a proposed form of combined authority with devolved powers but without an elected mayor. It may be used as a stepping stone towards a fuller mayoral combined or strategic authority. The Council says discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government continue, including the next steps and the scope and timing of any statutory consultation.

The Council has directed readers to its online democracy pages for the reports and minutes relating to the 6 May 2025 meeting.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related reports

Cllr Dalton seeks another layer of local government

Cllr Coley on an attempt to create another layer of local government

Where do we stand on local government reorganisation in Epsom and Ewell and the County?

Nescot students restore Pat Eddery memorial bench at Epsom Downs

11 July 2026



Students from Nescot have helped restore a memorial bench dedicated to legendary jockey Pat Eddery at Epsom Downs Racecourse.

The work gave young people on Nescot's alternative provision programme, for those aged 14 to 16, practical experience in woodworking and restoration while contributing to one of Epsom's best-known sporting venues.

Eddery, regarded as one of the most successful jockeys in British racing history, rode more than 4,600 winners during a career spanning over three decades. He was British champion jockey 11 times and won The Derby on several occasions.

His achievements at Epsom Downs, and his long association with the Derby Festival, make the restoration of the memorial

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bench especially significant.

Following the project, the students were invited to Epsom Downs Racecourse to see the bench reinstated in the Parade Ring. They were also given a behind-the-scenes tour of the historic Queen Elizabeth II Stand by Julie Kapsalis MBE, Principal and CEO of Nescot and a member of the Epsom Downs Racecourse Committee.

The group visited areas not usually open to the public and followed the route taken by King Charles III and Queen Camilla during their recent Derby Festival visit, ending at the Royal Box balcony overlooking the racecourse.

Julie Kapsalis said: “Working alongside The Jockey Club on projects like this is a fantastic example of how education and industry can come together to benefit both students and the wider community.

“Our students have shown tremendous dedication in restoring this important memorial, gaining valuable practical skills while helping to preserve a piece of Epsom’s unique heritage.”

Jim Allen, General Manager at Epsom Downs Racecourse, said the restored bench was “a fitting tribute to one of racing’s greatest jockeys”.

He added: “The students have done an outstanding job. The bench looks absolutely fantastic and is a fitting tribute to one of racing’s greatest jockeys.

“We are proud to see it back in the Parade Ring, where racegoers, owners, trainers and jockeys can continue to enjoy it for many years to come.”

The bench restoration is part of a developing partnership between Nescot and The Jockey Club. Nescot students also sang on the Community Zone stage at this year’s Betfred Derby Festival and have begun work on a large-scale mural for the racecourse underpass, intended to mark the 250th running of the Derby in 2029.

The project combines practical learning with the preservation of a small but meaningful part of Epsom’s racing heritage.

Photo: Nescot students with NESCOT CEO Julie Kapsalis

Sam Jones – Reporter



Two years on: Helen Maguire’s record as Epsom and Ewell MP

11 July 2026



Helen Maguire marks two years as Epsom and Ewell’s MP today, having won the constituency for the Liberal Democrats at the General Election on 4 July 2024.

Her victory, by 3,686 votes, ended the 23-year Commons tenure of Conservative Chris Grayling and made her the first Liberal Democrat and first woman to represent the seat.

Two years later, her record combines a continuing Westminster front-bench role, a highly visible constituency operation, claims of progress on local health and transport issues, and an unusually public breakdown in relationships with leading local Liberal Democrats.

From Defence lead to specialist health brief

Maguire’s first major Commons appointment came quickly after her election. In September 2024 she became the Liberal Democrats’ spokesperson for Defence, placing her at the head of the party’s Commons work on defence policy, service welfare, veterans and the Armed Forces.

She took part in detailed scrutiny of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill and has remained active on military accommodation, veterans’ compensation and support for bereaved service families.

In October 2025, she moved to the Liberal Democrat front-bench role of spokesperson for Primary Care and Cancer. She

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remains a front-bench spokesperson, but the change altered her place within the party's portfolio structure.

Her Defence post was an umbrella departmental brief. Her current role is a specialist health position within the wider Liberal Democrat Health and Social Care operation, headed by Helen Morgan MP.

Maguire's focus has since included GP access, pharmacy provision, cancer treatment, NHS dentistry, women's health, hospital services and patient access to care.

Hospitals, health and primary care

Healthcare has become one of Maguire's most prominent local themes.

She has repeatedly raised the condition and future of St Helier Hospital, including in her maiden speech and an abseiling adventure at St Helier Hospital. Her office says that, following a sustained campaign involving meetings with hospital stakeholders and parliamentary pressure, St Helier has secured £57 million for its A&E department.

The office also highlights £12 million in funding for Epsom Hospital. It says Maguire has secured commitments to improve endometriosis services after constituents raised concerns about their treatment, including increased clinical capacity, enhanced surgical provision, improved follow-up and stronger administrative oversight.

Her office further says she has supported the national pharmacy funding package in connection with Horton Pharmacy, visited local dentists while pressing for better NHS dental provision, and promoted neighbourhood health centres intended to bring services closer to residents.

At Westminster, she has used her new health role to raise issues including cancer medicines, primary care, breast cancer, patient access to treatment and the impact of NHS policy on people facing complex health conditions.

Rail services, access and local infrastructure

Rail services have been another major local campaign.

Maguire has pressed South Western Railway over reduced train frequencies since the pandemic and argued that passengers in Epsom and Ewell should have greater influence over future timetables. Her office says SWR is expected to launch a formal public consultation on a new timetable, describing this as a step towards restoring services closer to pre-Covid levels.

Accessibility at Ewell West station has also featured. Her office says that, following discussions with SWR, two additional Blue Badge spaces were created alongside a painted pedestrian route, zebra crossing and dropped kerbs providing a step-free route to the station entrance.

She has also raised accessibility issues in Parliament, including concern that some disabled and visually impaired passengers can be disadvantaged by ticket-machine systems and reduced staffed facilities.

Other local campaigns listed by her office include pavement parking, Thames Water sewage discharges, electric-vehicle charging infrastructure and persistent dust and noise complaints connected with the Chalk Pit.

Casework, community activity and local presence

As with any MP, much of Maguire's work is carried out through individual constituency cases rather than Commons speeches.

Her office says more than 17,000 constituents have received casework, campaign or policy responses over the past two years. That figure covers different forms of contact and assistance, rather than necessarily 17,000 separate individual cases.

Examples cited by her office include help with Personal Independence Payment claims, SEND cases, passport and visa delays, taxi licensing, Blue Badges, housing-association repairs and other departmental or local-authority problems.

The office says she has held regular surgeries and meetings across Epsom, Ewell, Ashtead and Leatherhead, alongside visits to schools, clubs, businesses, health providers and community organisations.

Among the examples highlighted are meetings over the Bridge Youth and Community Centre, the cost-of-living crisis and violence against women and girls; police walkabouts in Epsom and Leatherhead; engagement with the local Hong Kong community over BN(O) visa changes; visits to local dentists and independent businesses; support for sports clubs and park improvements; and activity around Chamber Mead wetlands and the release of water voles.

Armed Forces, veterans and international work

Maguire's military background remains visible in her parliamentary and constituency activity.

Her office says she has helped press for improved housing standards for service personnel and their families, campaigned for free rail travel to remembrance events for bereaved military families, and maintained links with the local Armed Forces community through Remembrance and Territorial Army events.

She also retains an international profile. Her parliamentary interests include Ukraine, Russia (which has sanctioned her), conflict prevention, humanitarian demining and the impact of explosive weapons on civilians. She has held roles in cross-party groups addressing explosive weapons and conflict-related humanitarian concerns.

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Registered interests and comparisons with predecessors

Maguire's Commons register of interests contains 18 current entries. These include campaign and constituency-event support, hospitality, overseas visits, former rental-property interests, shareholdings held jointly with her husband and an unpaid directorship.

Her register does not show current paid outside employment or a second job. That is a different profile from her two predecessors.

Chris Grayling, now Lord Grayling, has a House of Lords register focused principally on paid advisory roles and rental income. Before him, Sir Archibald Hamilton developed a reputation in the 1990s for holding a large number of outside interests. Contemporary reporting placed him among the Conservative MPs with the highest number of paid external roles.

The comparisons are imperfect because disclosure rules have changed substantially over the decades. But Maguire's register is materially different from the paid consultancy and directorship profile associated with Hamilton. Her entries are mainly donations, hospitality, travel, shareholdings and historic property interests rather than paid outside work.

All such entries are published under parliamentary disclosure rules and do not in themselves imply wrongdoing.

Local Liberal Democrat rupture

The most difficult political aspect of Maguire's first two years has been the breakdown in relationships within the Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrat organisation.

Cllr **Julie Morris**, the long-serving College Ward councillor and now Deputy Mayor, resigned from the Liberal Democrats Group she led and became an Independent. She was later followed by Cllr **James Lawrence**, her successor as leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, who also left the party to sit as an Independent.

Their departures reduced the Liberal Democrat group on the Borough Council and strengthened the Independent group.

Lawrence was explicit in linking his resignation partly to Maguire. He said he believed the MP had become too focused on "leafleting and electioneering" rather than meaningful national policy change. He also referred to concerns about the effect of her approach on volunteers who gave time to the Liberal Democrat Party.

Morris likewise referred to difficulties within the local Liberal Democrat organisation and the MP's political operation as part of the background to her own decision.

A later episode during the East Surrey Unitary Council election campaign added to the political controversy.

At the count on 8 May 2026, Epsom and Ewell Times reported that Helen Maguire's communications officer directed newly elected Liberal Democrat candidates not to speak to the media and said journalists should instead seek interviews with Maguire.

Maguire publicly disputed EET's account at a Westminster reception. However, in subsequent correspondence her communications officer, Esther Holland, accepted that a restriction on media engagement had been in place, while denying that Maguire herself had imposed a "gag".

The explanation given was that, though on a Parliament sanctioned salary, Holland was also acting as East Surrey Liberal Democrat communications officer and that the temporary restriction was for electoral purposes. Maguire's office said she knew of the arrangement but had not personally directed it.

The episode did not establish that Maguire herself ordered the media restriction though she was an integral part of its workings and presumably agreed with it. But it became politically significant because it reinforced criticism from former Liberal Democrat councillors that messaging and decision-making were being tightly controlled from the MP's wider political operation.

Maguire has rejected that overall characterisation. She has defended regular canvassing, community visibility and campaigning as essential ways to identify residents' problems and take them into Parliament.

A busy and politically mixed first two years

Maguire's first two years have been active and politically consequential.

She has maintained a high local profile through surgeries, campaigning, site visits, community meetings and casework. Her office identifies progress or claimed successes on hospital funding, rail accessibility, pharmacy provision, sports facilities, local infrastructure and individual constituent cases.

At Westminster, she has remained on the Liberal Democrat front bench throughout, although her role has changed from leading the party's whole Defence brief to holding a specialist primary care and cancer portfolio.

Her critics within the former local Liberal Democrat leadership argue that her approach has placed too much emphasis on political control, campaigning and messaging. Her supporters will see an energetic MP using visibility and local contact to pursue practical outcomes.

The next stage of her parliamentary term will test whether the activity of the first two years turns into durable local gains: more reliable rail services, improved hospital provision, better primary-care access, effective action on environmental and infrastructure concerns, and stronger support for residents dealing with SEND, housing and public-service delays.

Sam Jones – Reporter

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Epsom’s Rosebery School has a foundation for students’ ambitions

11 July 2026



Rosebery School in Epsom has launched a new charitable foundation aimed at helping pupils pursue their ambitions regardless of their financial or personal circumstances.

The Rosebery Foundation has been established as part of the wider GLF Schools Foundation, supported by donations from former pupils including the family of Dianne Long, who joined Rosebery School in 1953.

Rosebery, which is part of the GLF Schools multi-academy trust, said the Foundation will help remove financial barriers which can prevent pupils from taking part in opportunities outside the classroom.

Its work will focus on five main areas: enrichment and opportunity; wellbeing and belonging; leadership and empowerment; networks and futures; and Rosebery Rewilding, which promotes wellbeing and personal development through nature and outdoor learning.

The Foundation will also seek to draw on the school’s wider community of former pupils, parents and partners to create mentoring opportunities, professional connections and new experiences for pupils.

One of its first major projects will be a summer visit to the European Space Centre in Belgium, intended to encourage girls interested in science, technology and maths.

The visit has been funded by Dianne Long and the Di Long family through a bursary established within the Foundation.

Holly Lowe, Assistant Headteacher at Rosebery School, is leading work on the Foundation. She said: “At Rosebery, our students are highly aspirational and achieve exceptionally well. Within school, we expect them to use their voice, take intellectual risks and see themselves as leaders. It is simply part of how we work day to day.

“The reality, however, is that all girls will encounter barriers beyond school. The wider world does not always reflect or reinforce those expectations in the same way. For disadvantaged students, these challenges can be felt more keenly, particularly where there is less access to enrichment, professional networks and the kinds of experiences that open doors and build confidence.”

The Foundation has already hosted an alumnae day as part of the school’s Student Futures Festival for Year 12 pupils.

Fifteen former Rosebery pupils returned to the school, representing a range of generations and careers. They took part in panel discussions, workshops, talks and an afternoon mentoring session.

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The school said such events can help build confidence, widen horizons and raise aspirations, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ms Lowe added: “Through the Rosebery Foundation, our focus is on making sure students are not only achieving highly, which they already are here, but are fully prepared for what comes next. Ultimately, it is about ensuring that all our students leave Rosebery ready not just to succeed, but to step into the world with the confidence and the connections to shape it.”

Sam Jones – Reporter



Photo of Rosebery’s first Foundation event, an alumnae day.

Epsom and Ewell Council admit behind hygiene inspections

11 July 2026



The borough’s environmental health team has told councillors it is running behind on lower-risk food hygiene inspections — deliberately prioritising higher-risk premises such as takeaways, schools and hospitals over sweet shops and home caterers — as the Environment Committee – Tuesday 30th June – adopted the council’s Food Hygiene Service Plan for 2026/27, in what officers confirmed will be the council’s last year running the service before Surrey-wide local government reorganisation.

Councils have a statutory duty, under a national Framework Agreement on Official Feed and Food Controls overseen by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), to inspect food businesses in their area at intervals set by risk category — broadly, the higher the risk, the more frequent the inspection. As of April 2026, the borough had 611 registered food premises, including 444 restaurants, cafés, canteens and other caterers and 139 retailers. Of these, 133 fall into the higher-risk categories A to C, requiring inspection every six, 12 or 18 months respectively; a further 120 businesses are newly registered and awaiting their first ever inspection.

Catching up, but not quite there

Public Protection Manager Oliver Nelson told the committee the service had actually exceeded its own targets in 2025/26, completing 237 inspections against a planned 161, largely by working through a backlog of overdue inspections and newly registered businesses that had not yet been visited. Even so, the plan for 2026/27 shows 207 scheduled inspections still due — including two Category A premises (the highest-risk tier, inspected every six months), 25 Category B, 77 Category C and 101 lower-risk Category D — plus a further 74 inspections reported as overdue from previous years.

Cllr **Steve McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley) pressed officers on why these 74 remained outstanding, and — more pointedly — “why is this statutory service unable to meet this demand, and how can we approve a plan that cannot deliver?” Mr Nelson said the situation was “not unusual” for a local authority environmental health team: the overdue premises are “mainly category E” — meaning very low-risk operations such as sweet shops and small-scale or domestic home caterers — which have been deliberately “deprioritised in favour of food production facilities, schools, hospitals, takeaways” and other higher-risk categories. He explained that his team juggles “four or five different” statutory service areas across several council committees competing for the same limited resources: “It’s a daily task to try and arrange yourself to cover all those bases,” he said, “and what happens is that the lower risk areas are deprioritised in favour of the higher risk every time.”

Staffing pressures and past scrutiny

The report notes that the service has struggled with staff retention, and that a newly created post remains vacant and covered by agency staff — leaving the small team vulnerable, officers said, since even a single experienced officer leaving risks non-compliance with statutory duties. Historically, 1.2 full-time-equivalent officers have been sufficient to meet the Food Law Code of Practice’s requirements for the borough, a level the service says it can currently sustain provided

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staffing and agency support remain stable.

Cllr McCormick also asked about a reference in the report to "the existing agreed action plan arising from previous Food Standards Agency intervention" — asking what that intervention had covered, and when the service was last formally audited. Mr Nelson could not recall the exact audit date on the night, estimating it was "probably in the last four years," and agreed to circulate fuller details after the meeting. He said the earlier FSA intervention had flagged underperformance not just in the lowest-risk category but also in Categories B and C, at a time when staff resources had been diverted towards private sector housing casework.

The wider context: a service in its final year

In an unusually reflective note buried in the report's final section, officers wrote that 2026/27 "will be the final year of delivery of this service by this authority following 90 years of work in the field by Inspectors of Nuisances, Sanitary Inspectors, Public Health Officers and finally Environmental Health Officers" — a reference to the borough council's abolition under Surrey's local government reorganisation, with food safety functions due to transfer to a new unitary authority from April 2027.

Elsewhere, Mr Nelson noted that several web links in the appended service plan had broken because the Food Standards Agency had migrated its guidance to the gov.uk website: "If any members of the committee would like those documents, I'm sure Google will be their friend," he said.

Enforcement activity and the vote

During 2025/26 the service issued four hygiene improvement notices and 200 written warnings to food businesses. No food or environmental samples were taken during the year, officers said, as priority was given to the inspection programme; a separate allocation of around £2,800 a year from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) funds routine microbiological sampling, alongside a local £450 budget for chemical sampling in 2026/27.

The committee voted to adopt the Food Hygiene Service Plan for 2026/27, with one councillor voting against.

Sam Jones – Reporter



"Come on" all tennis players in Epsom and Ewell

11 July 2026



A borough scheme charging residents to play tennis on council courts has taken in almost double its budgeted income in its second full year, the Environment Committee – Tuesday 30th June – heard, as members confirmed that free morning tennis sessions will return across the borough's courts this summer.

The Pay-to-Play Tennis Scheme was introduced in 2024 using a grant-funded electronic gate system from the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), the sport's national governing body, paired with an online booking platform called Clubspark. Under the scheme, households can buy an annual membership for £40 (£20 for low-income households) covering up to five people for unlimited play, or book a court on an ad-hoc basis for £6 an hour — prices fixed at their original, introductory level through to 2026/27.

The numbers

Interim Assistant Head of Service Samantha Whitehead told the committee the scheme's growth had exceeded expectations. Household memberships rose from 268 in 2024/25 to 316 in 2025/26, while ad-hoc bookings climbed from 1,404 to 1,868 over the same period. Net income of £31,634.62 comfortably beat a budget of £17,500. "I don't think any of us at the outset thought it would bring back the returns that it has in a relatively short period," she said, adding that renovation works funded through the scheme's income at Court Recreation Ground, Alexandra Park and Auriol Park courts had already paid off: "My team report that since the recent renovations at [Auriol] Park this weekend was the most amount of bookings they've ever seen on the courts."

The scheme was not without unbudgeted costs, however — £21,140.11 was spent on repainting and line-marking at Court Recreation Ground and Alexandra Park, requiring a drawdown of £7,984.46 from the council's Repairs and Renewals

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Reserve, which now stands at £8,426.54.

Free summer tennis returns

Free, bookable morning tennis sessions were run for the first time during the 2025 school summer holidays and proved highly popular, generating 566 bookings across the borough's five sites: 203 at Alexandra Park, 164 at Court Recreation Ground, 88 at Poole Road, 75 at Auriol Park and 36 at Gibraltar Recreation Ground. Officers recommended repeating the offer, running free sessions up to noon each day from 22 July to 31 August 2026.

Before debating the substance of the report, the committee formally amended the recommendation, at Cllr **Liz Frost**'s (RA Woodcote and Langley) proposal, to make clear the free sessions apply to "all EEBC owned and managed" tennis courts in the borough — a clarification agreed with one abstention.

Cllr **Steve McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley) asked whether residents needed to register with the Clubspark booking system to access the free sessions. Ms Whitehead confirmed they did: "They do have to register with the LTA Clubspark system, which means that they could be exposed to marketing in the future if we chose to do that, but in return they get free use of the tennis courts." Cllr Frost noted a further benefit of requiring bookings even for free sessions — it stops courts being monopolised by a single group all day, since "now people have the confidence that… they booked play, so they can go and play."

A push to extend the hours — defeated

Cllr McCormick, noting this would be the borough's "last summer" before local government reorganisation replaces it with a new unitary authority, argued the free window should be extended well beyond midday. "It's incredibly popular… why not extend it?" he asked, proposing the sessions run until 2pm instead of noon, covering the same 22 July to 31 August period. "It's only an extra couple of hours per day across that very short time frame," he said.

Ms Whitehead's reservation was that extending free access too far could crowd out members who had already paid for the privilege of unlimited play: "My only reservation would be for those that have paid for a membership, if they couldn't… get access to the facilities having paid, that would be my only caveat." Cllr Frost confirmed the committee had considered making sessions free all day the previous year, but had held back for the same reason, adding that the scheme had run smoothly in practice: officers "didn't receive any complaints from members" unable to book a paid slot, nor "any complaints that people couldn't play who wanted to play." Officers were unable to confirm on the night whether last year's free sessions were regularly fully booked, or how much the current proposal — or Cllr McCormick's extended version — would actually cost the committee's budget, saying the figures would need to be worked out and circulated after the meeting.

Cllr McCormick's amendment to extend the sessions to 2pm was put to a vote and defeated, with three councillors opposed. The committee then voted, unanimously, to note the progress of the Pay to Play Tennis Scheme and to approve free morning tennis sessions on all EEBC-owned and managed courts from 22 July to 31 August 2026, in line with last year's arrangements.

Also noted: bids for court upgrades

The report also noted that two separate Neighbourhood CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) bids — submitted by Cllrs **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) and **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) for the regeneration of the tennis and basketball courts at Poole Road and Gibraltar Recreation Grounds — have been approved by the council's CIL Panel and now go forward to the Strategy and Resources Committee for final sign-off. If successful, both sites would also gain pickleball facilities, a fast-growing paddle sport the report describes as offering "inclusive opportunities for participation across a wide range of ages and abilities."

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Anyone for tennis? If you pay.

LibDems call "Love All" for local tennis

Anyone for tennis?

Epsom and Ewell Council tiptoe around stepping stones "liability".

11 July 2026

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Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Environment Committee – Tuesday 30th June – has decided not to take on legal responsibility for the historic stepping stones across the Hogsmill River, after councillors concluded that accepting liability for a crossing already flagged as unsafe was too great a risk — instead backing a bid to build a new, fully accessible footbridge nearby.

The stepping stones, thought to have been installed in the early 1980s, sit within the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve and are owned by the Environment Agency (EA), which — unusually — owns both the riverbed and the banks at this location. The EA has told the council it wants to remove the stones and the steps leading down to them on safety grounds, unless another organisation takes on responsibility for their ongoing inspection, maintenance and insurance.

Why now?

Countryside Manager Stuart Cocker told the committee two problems had brought matters to a head. First, the concrete steps on the northern bank have been undermined by dogs entering and leaving the water at that point, creating a risk of collapse — the first significant repair needed on the crossing "in over 40 years," he said, with a repair cost of under £1,000. Second, a new wetland outflow channel built as part of nearby habitat restoration work has altered water levels, meaning the stones are now submerged, and therefore slippery, for much longer periods than in the past. The EA erected barriers preventing access to the stones in September 2025 following its own risk assessment.

Mr Cocker stressed that the EA remains an active partner in the wider Hogsmill Catchment Partnership, alongside the South East Rivers Trust, and pointed to what he called significant progress over 15 to 20 years, including "new meanders in the River Hogsmill," removal of concrete weirs, "naturalising large sections of the river channel" and reintroducing fish.

He also had some encouraging news on the water-level problem: the South East Rivers Trust has secured the Environment Agency's permission to move gravel that has built up at the confluence with the new wetland channel, work being paid for as a "public good" clause within a separate CIL-funded contract to restore a nearby footpath. "We're fairly confident that that will cause the water levels to recede," Mr Cocker said, though he cautioned it might need repeating. Asked directly whether this work would persuade the EA to keep responsibility for the crossing after all, he was clear: "From what they've said, they still wish the stepping stones to be removed. That's their intention" — a decision he said rests with the EA's asset management team, based purely on flood-risk grounds, and unaffected by the availability of funds for anything beyond flood mitigation.

Four options, and a difficult choice

Officers set out four options for the committee: take on liability for the stones with no bridge; take on liability and build a bridge; decline liability but still pursue a bridge; or decline liability and accept the stones' removal with no bridge. A Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) bid for a new pedestrian footbridge — of the kind already built nearby across the wetland outflow channel, at a cost of around £130,000 — has already been submitted, though the outcome is not yet known, and design and planning costs on top of any successful bid would still need to be found separately.

Councillors were, without exception, reluctant to see the stones disappear. Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court) told the committee: "I'm afraid I'm one of those people who used to play there as a child, and I think there's always an element of risk in places where children play, especially when there's water, but I would hate to see the stepping stones gone. So, I'd like to say, please don't take the toys away." Cllr **Julie Morris** (Independent College) said she had researched the issue and found that stepping-stone river crossings of this kind are now rare in the south of England outside Box Hill: "I haven't really heard anybody speak in favour of getting rid of the stepping stones entirely," she said, though she accepted that without identified funding for the fuller package of repairs, a more modest package of gravel-clearing, a handrail and a warning sign might be "a sort of halfway house at the moment."

Cllr **Steve McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley) said he was "100% behind" retaining the stones and covering the modest repair cost, but was sharply critical of the bridge costings in the report, which he said "do not illustrate the full picture," since design and planning funding was not specified and would in any case need approval from the Strategy and Resources Committee rather than this one. He also pressed officers on what work had been done, in the years since the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve's management plan (which runs from 2017 to 2117, with its first review due in 2027) identified bank erosion by the stepping stones as an issue needing the Environment Agency's attention, to actually secure that work — a question Mr Cocker answered by pointing to the partnership's broader achievements rather than action on this specific spot.

The liability question

It was Cllr **Rachel King** (RA Town) — sitting as a substitute, and drawing on her day job dealing with insurance claims — who made the most pointed intervention against the council accepting responsibility. "You cannot sign your way out of

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liability," she told the committee, warning that no amount of warning signage removes an organisation's underlying duty of care. "I don't think we should be taking on that liability, because we know from the report currently that they are not safe, and until they are made safe, we wouldn't want to burden ourselves with that kind of responsibility." She later added that the committee risked "accepting liability" before the legal review, inspection regime and insurance implications flagged in the report had actually been worked through: "It feels a bit too, too big a risk to move forward in that direction without having done that work first."

Cllr **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford) raised a related, practical worry: that even if the stones were kept safely maintained, the steps leading down to the water would remain a magnet for children paddling regardless — and he warned that a single successful insurance claim could send premiums "up astronomically," potentially forcing the council's hand later anyway. Officers confirmed that if the council did not take on responsibility, the EA intends to remove both the steps and the stones.

Committee Chair Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley) also noted a case for the bridge on its own merits, separate from the liability question: with the new wetland habitat drawing more visitors to the area, she said, a bridge would open up access "for a lot more people," including those with prams, pushchairs or bikes who cannot manage the current steps and stones.

The vote

Put to a vote option by option, the committee settled on Option 3: the council will not take on liability for the stepping stones or the steps leading to them, acknowledging that the Environment Agency may proceed to remove them, but will pursue a new, fully accessible footbridge as an alternative crossing, subject to the outcome of the CIL funding bid and further funding being secured for design and planning. Councillors formally noted the CIL application, while the report's third recommendation — covering ongoing inspection and maintenance costs for the stones — fell away as a consequence of the vote. Closing the item, Cllr Frost reflected: "I think it's a very difficult one, because I think we all acknowledge how much we like the stepping stones, and I really hope that somebody else will be able to take on the responsibility, but that's not really for this meeting."

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Photo: Stepping Stones – Hogsmill River. Credit Brigitte Jeffs

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Ewell's Library of Things finally to become a thing?

11 July 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Environment Committee – Tuesday 30th June – has agreed to grant a police-approved outdoor storage unit in the grounds of Bourne Hall a five-year lease, with a two-year break clause, after councillors argued that officers' original proposal of a two-year term was too short to give the volunteer group running the scheme any security.

The store is needed for the borough's new "Library of Things" (LoT) — a scheme, similar to a book library, that lets residents borrow tools, camping equipment and household appliances rather than buying them outright. It is being set up by the volunteer group Epsom and Ewell Climate Action Network (EECAN) in partnership with Surrey Library Service, and will operate out of Ewell Library at Bourne Hall. Most items can be stored inside the library itself, but larger equipment needs a dedicated outdoor store — hence the need for a legal agreement over council-owned land.

A volunteer's account

Before councillors debated the report, they heard a three-minute public statement from EECAN volunteer William Ward, describing himself as "a father and grandfather," who joined the meeting online. Mr Ward told the committee: "I am working with 12 other volunteers to provide this free library of things at Bourne Hall, and I support the recommendations in the report."

He used his statement to correct what he felt could be misunderstandings in the officers' report. His original bid to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) — a charge councils can levy on new development to fund local infrastructure —

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“was for one permanent shed, not multiple units,” he said, and had been approved at a meeting with six borough and county officers on 14 October, when the proposed site was shown to the volunteers present. He set out a lengthy timeline of pre-planning discussions, a planning application submitted on Christmas Eve, planning permission granted on 12 March, and confirmation from Building Control on 19 February that it did not need to be involved.

He also told the committee: “I’ve continued working with all partners, but only became aware last week from reading this report that the borough needed me to consult with the police. I want to reassure the committee that although I am [confident], the design addresses [many] of the risks [identified]. I’m happy to take further advice.” On safety, he noted that insurance was already in place, that Surrey County Council’s principal insurance officer had agreed to cover the store under its “Borrow a Bike” scheme, and that a planned green roof would carry a small solar installation providing only low-voltage lighting, with “no battery charging” to take place inside the unit.

Mr Ward ended with a warning about timing. If the lease “cannot be ready for signing well before April [20]27” — when local government reorganisation is due to sweep away the borough council in favour of a new East Surrey Unitary Authority — he said he might have to ask the incoming authority to reconsider storing the larger items inside Bourne Hall itself. He closed by asking the committee “to also consider the climate risk facing young people today,” saying his aim, with fellow volunteers, “has always been to help residents borrow instead of buy, save money and storage space, while lowering their carbon footprints.”

Officers’ concerns: wrong kind of shed

Introducing the report, Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley) explained that the store was needed because Bourne Hall library “does not have sufficient storage space for the large items” the scheme requires, and that a two-year, rent-free legal agreement directly with EECAN was proposed, subject to planning permission and a series of health and safety mitigations.

Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court) asked officers directly: “Is there a concern that this is a wooden building when it was proposed to be a metal building?” Cllr Frost confirmed this was indeed a live issue. The CIL bid had originally referenced small, “police-approved” metal storage units no larger than 2.2m by 1m by 2m — the kind of secure steel shed used for bike storage. The planning permission that was in fact granted, however, was for a much larger timber outbuilding measuring 7.2m by 3.4m by 3.4m. “There has been… a history of unfortunate incidents with break-ins, vandalism, arson, etc. for buildings like [this],” Cllr Frost told the committee. “So the lease would stipulate a police-approved structure.”

A legal puzzle officers could not resolve on the night

Cllr **Steve McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley) raised what he called a contradiction in the report between sections referring to the committee “waiving” the council’s Contract Standing Orders in order to grant the lease directly to EECAN (rather than opening it to competitive tender), and a later section stating that the council would still need to establish the land’s market value to satisfy “best value” — the legal principle requiring councils to secure fair value for public assets. “Forgive me, which is it?” he asked.

No legal officer was present to answer. This was itself the subject of some frustration: Cllr McCormick had earlier asked in the meeting why nobody from the council’s legal team was in attendance, only to be told by an officer that “legal don’t attend committee meetings as standard… there was nothing that was foreseen tonight that would require their attendance.” On the specific question about best value, the officer present said: “I think I would have to take that away and go back to legal on it, because I don’t have the answer for you this evening, I’m afraid.”

The case for a longer lease

The most substantial debate concerned the length of the lease. Cllr McCormick argued strongly for extending it well beyond the two years proposed: “This library of things item is great. We should get it done… I would question the duration, actually, of two years. I think it’s incredibly short,” he said, pointing out that other local charities had recently had leases extended to 15 or 20 years, giving them far more flexibility when applying for grant funding. He initially proposed extending the term to 10 or 15 years.

Officers explained that the two-year figure had come from legal advice, given specifically because EECAN was “a new group” without a track record of running such a scheme; the original suggestion, before that advice, had been five years. Officers said they could see no reason why a review clause could not allow for extension after two years “if all was going well,” but that this would need to be confirmed with the council’s legal team.

Cllr Frost, while sympathetic to the case for grant funding, questioned how much external funding a volunteer-led scheme with no office overheads would actually need, but agreed the recommendation could be amended.

Cllr **Julie Morris** (Independent College) backed a middle way — five years, with a two-year break clause — and spoke warmly of Mr Ward’s track record: “I’ve known William Ward for some time… he’s not the new kid on the block… he has been involved in environmental and sustainability issues for some years.” She argued that a two-year offer, with an uncertain future council to renew it, sent the wrong message: “I don’t see that as commitment from us to a gentleman that’s actually done quite a lot for this borough that has a very good following, and will undoubtedly make a very good job of it. And I think it should be the role of this committee that we say [to] you’re not here, guys: this is what we want you to do. We want five years with the break clause at two years, because we really want to put our weight behind such a good initiative.”

Cllr McCormick accepted the compromise — “I’d like 10, but five, I’ll go for five” — and, with Cllr Morris seconding, the amendment was carried.

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The decision

The committee unanimously agreed, as amended, to enter into a legal agreement at nil rent for five years, with a two-year break clause, for a police-approved outdoor store at Bourne Hall for the Library of Things — subject to the risk mitigations set out in the report — and to delegate the final legal drafting to the Head of Property and Regeneration, the Interim Assistant Head of Service for Venues and Community Commercial Services, and the Chief Legal and Monitoring Officer. Cllr Frost thanked Mr Ward “for coming along and making his presentation to us,” and thanked officers for their work on the report.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports:

Epsom “Library of Things” Delayed by Council Stand-Off

Epsom and Ewell Climate Action Network launches with community events and initiatives

The Mayor of Epsom and Ewell meets local climate volunteers

Epsom company among Surrey businesses backed by £20m Start Up Loans funding

11 July 2026



An Epsom-based craft distillery is among more than 1,500 Surrey businesses to have benefited from over £20 million in Start Up Loans funding since the national scheme began in 2012. The distillery is located in Capel.

Silhouette Stills, whose registered address is in Rosebery Road, Epsom, operates a craft distillery in Capel producing small-batch gin and moonshine. Companies House records list Phillip Anthony Reed as the company’s active director. (Companies House)

The business, established in 2025, received an initial Start Up Loan of £12,000 in April last year, followed by a further £5,000 loan to support its development.

According to the British Business Bank, Silhouette Stills has already received recognition in The Gin Guide, including two gold awards and a bronze award for its London Dry gin, as well as being named New Distillery of the Year 2026.

Phillip Reed said: “The financing from the Start Up Loans programme has been completely essential to helping get Silhouette Stills started. It’s because of the financing we’re in a position to produce our small batch moonshine, and to do so at the top quality we want for customers. We’re delighted to have won awards already as a young business and look forward to the future with confidence.”

Across Surrey, the highest number of loans has been made in Elmbridge, with 241. Guildford follows with 219, while Reigate and Banstead has received 203.

Epsom and Ewell businesses have received 106 loans in total, equivalent to 127 loans per 100,000 residents. That places the borough seventh in Surrey by the number of loans per head among the local authorities listed.

Blair McDougall, Minister for Small Business and Economic Transformation, said: “Surrey is home to a thriving community of entrepreneurs and through Start Up Loans, we are ensuring they have access to the finance they need to reach their full potential.

“This is an impressive milestone for the programme, which has supported entrepreneurs across the region, boosting local businesses, job opportunities and the economy.”

Almost four in ten Surrey Start Up Loans have gone to female business leaders, while 18 per cent were made to ethnic-minority business owners, the British Business Bank said.

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Louise McCoy, Managing Director of Start Up Loans Products at the British Business Bank, said the £20 million milestone reflected the programme's role in helping people establish or grow businesses.

She said: "We are delighted that Start Up Loans has been able to support Surrey business owners with £20m of financing, and are proud to support business owners with mentoring and other support as well."

The Start Up Loans programme offers personal loans of up to £25,000 for business purposes, alongside mentoring and support. Eligibility for a first loan has recently been extended to businesses that have been trading for up to 60 months.

Start Up Loans Surrey lending data

Local authority	Population	Volume of loans	Loans per 100,000 people
Elmbridge	141,926	241	170
Tandridge	90,586	142	157
Woking	105,679	159	150
Waverley	134,284	202	150
Guildford	151,359	219	145
Reigate and Banstead	159,134	203	128
Epsom and Ewell	83,288	106	127
Runnymede	92,118	116	126
Surrey Heath	94,492	116	123
Mole Valley	88,709	102	115
Spelthorne	107,074	110	103

For more information about the scheme, visit the Start Up Loans website.

British Business Bank plc is a public limited company incorporated and registered in England and Wales with registration number 08616013. It is a development bank wholly owned by HM Government.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Photo: Phil Reed in his distillery

Around 100 attend Epsom unity event after April far-right disorder

11 July 2026



Around 100 people gathered in Rosebery Park for a community event intended to promote unity and reject racism following far-right disorder in Epsom earlier this year.

The free event, held on Saturday 27 June and organised by Stand Up to Racism Epsom & Ewell, brought together families, faith representatives, local campaigners and politicians for music, speeches, food, children's activities and a community art project.

It followed events in April when Epsom attracted attention from far-right activists from outside the area after social-media discussion and misinformation surrounding an alleged rape. The subsequent disorder prompted concern among residents and community groups.

Saturday's gathering included speeches by Epsom and Ewell MP Helen Maguire, Reverend Catherine Hutton of Epsom Methodist Church, Labour councillor Kate Chinn and Green councillor Jonathan Essex. Messages of support were also

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shared on behalf of Epsom Mosque and the local Sikh community.

Those attending heard live music from Canada Hill, with DJ Amalgamation also performing. Children's face painting, food, stalls and a collaborative art activity were among the attractions.

A "Facts Not Fear" stall aimed to challenge misinformation and far-right narratives. The Epsom and Ewell Climate Network was represented, alongside members of Stand Up to Racism and local Green and Labour Party stalls. Organisers said the Conservative Party had been invited but had not responded.

Deborah Fish, of Stand Up to Racism Epsom & Ewell, said: "The response to our Unity Event showed that Epsom and Ewell rejects racism and division.

"There was a real sense of hope and solidarity in the crowd. People from many different backgrounds came together because they want to live in a welcoming, inclusive community and are determined to stand together against racism and the far right."

Reverend Hutton said Epsom Methodist Church would continue to provide "a space of safety and sanctuary for all".

Ms Maguire told the gathering: "We are here today because we choose to stand for something. We choose to say that racism has no home here. Disinformation has no home here and division has no home here.

"As your Member of Parliament, I will continue to stand up to racism."

Event host and organiser Ammo Sandhawalia said the turnout showed "Epsom and Ewell's true colours" were "warm, welcoming and united".

He added: "To see around a hundred neighbours come together with their families, their faith communities, their councillors and their MP, sharing food, music and art in our park, was simply joyous."

Stand Up to Racism Epsom & Ewell describes itself as a local group campaigning for inclusion, safety and unity across the borough.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Photo: Reverend Catherine Hutton of Epsom Methodist Church

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Epsom's Woodcote Stud homes plan approved despite transport and Green Belt concerns

11 July 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved plans to redevelop the former Woodcote Stud site in Wilmerhatch Lane with 14 homes — half of them affordable — and expanded supported-living accommodation.

The Planning Committee backed the scheme by seven votes to one at its meeting on 18 June. The Chair, Cllr **Clive Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) did not vote.

The approved development involves demolition of the redundant former stud-farm buildings, while retaining Woodcote House. A new supported-living building will expand the existing care provision, alongside 14 new homes including seven affordable properties.

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The legal agreement attached to the permission will require affordable housing, biodiversity-net-gain measures and public-transport works, including a new bus stop and pedestrian crossing on Wilmerhatch Lane.

The Planning officer told councillors the former stud farm had not been used for its original purpose for several years. He said the development would provide “an expansion to the existing operation on the site” and new housing, while retaining the historic Woodcote House.

Applicant’s agent Philip Dunphy of Causeway Planning said the family-owned stud farm had struggled to attract a replacement operator following the death of its owner in 2021.

He said: “There has been attempts to attract new operators, such as those in the racehorse training industry, but all have proved unsuccessful.”

Mr Dunphy said potential operators had cited distance from Epsom Racecourse, limited access to training gallops and wider accessibility difficulties.

He argued that the proposals would prevent the site falling into further vacancy and dilapidation, while delivering “much needed housing” and supported-living accommodation.

The scheme was considered under national Green Belt policy and the newer concept of “grey belt” land — previously developed land within the Green Belt that may be suitable for development where it makes only a limited contribution to Green Belt purposes.

Cllr Woodbridge said the officer report made the case that the land was previously developed and did not perform a particularly strong Green Belt function.

He added: “This provides useful housing to a council that’s very short of housing, and 50% is affordable housing, which I think this committee must welcome.”

But several councillors raised questions about whether the site was sufficiently sustainable, given its location between Epsom and Ashtead and limited public-transport links.

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) said the route through Woodcote Side could provide a more direct pedestrian and cycling connection to bus services, but questioned whether it would remain reliably available.

“The only thing I still don’t understand is it’s in the application that they can use the Woodcote Side entrance, but for pedestrians and cycles, but now I’ve been told that that could be withdrawn at any time,” she said.

Cllr Chinn added that both the Woodcote Stud area and Langley Vale suffered from “very poor public transport”, suggesting that wider discussions might be needed about improving bus links.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) also expressed concern about the development’s distance from railway stations and the limited frequency of local buses.

He said: “My main concern” was that residents would be likely to depend on cars if sufficient infrastructure was not available. Cllr Persand also questioned the loss of the site’s equestrian use, pointing to Epsom’s racing and horse-related heritage. “I think it’s a highly weighted one in Epsom, because once we lose that, it’s a bit of a domino effect, and the industry itself will suffer from that,” he said.

Officers said no equestrian bodies had submitted objections during the consultation. They said the site had been unused for equestrian purposes for around five years and was poorly connected to the racecourse and training facilities.

The planning officer said the existing access from Wilmerhatch Lane would be widened to enable larger vehicles to enter and pass safely. Councillors had raised concerns about potholes and the condition of the approach road, particularly during construction.

Cllr **Humphrey Reynolds** (RA West Ewell) praised the quality of the officer report after the decision, telling officers: “It’s an excellent report, well done.”

Permission remains subject to completion of a Section 106 legal agreement (a developer investment in infrastructure). If that is not completed by 18 September, officers have been authorised to refuse the application. The permission also includes conditions covering construction traffic, drainage, tree protection, accessible homes, electric-vehicle charging, cycle storage and a 30-year habitat-management programme.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Woodcote Stud entrance from Wilmerhatch Lane. EEBC planning documents. Maydencroft

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Epsom rail passengers urged to travel only if

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essential as extreme heat disrupts services

11 July 2026



Rail passengers using Epsom station are being urged to avoid all but essential journeys on Wednesday and Thursday as extreme heat is expected to bring disruption across Surrey's rail network.

Southern, which runs services through Epsom towards London Victoria, Sutton and Dorking, has warned that it will operate a reduced timetable as trains are required to run more slowly in the exceptional temperatures.

The warning also applies to South Western Railway services from Epsom towards Wimbledon and London Waterloo. SWR has told passengers to check before travelling on Tuesday and to make journeys on Wednesday and Thursday only where absolutely necessary, warning that services may be altered or cancelled at short notice.

The Met Office has issued a rare Red Extreme Heat Warning covering much of southern and central England. Conditions are expected to be most severe on Wednesday 24 June and Thursday 25 June, with very high daytime temperatures and little overnight relief.

Southern's parent company Govia Thameslink Railway said fewer trains would operate across its Southern, Thameslink and Great Northern networks, with journeys taking longer and trains likely to be busier.

Passengers are being advised to consider postponing trips until later in the week, or to travel earlier or later in the day where possible.

South Western Railway has issued similar advice for its network, including routes serving Surrey. Its current travel notice says that hot weather may lead to short-notice timetable changes and cancellations between Tuesday and Thursday.

The disruption is linked to the effect of extreme heat on railway infrastructure. Steel rails expand in high temperatures and can buckle, while overhead wires, signalling equipment and train systems can also be affected.

Network Rail says rails in direct sunshine can be substantially hotter than the surrounding air temperature. It may therefore impose temporary speed restrictions during the hottest parts of the day to reduce the risk of track damage and keep services operating safely.

Jenny Saunders, Customer Service Director for Southern, Thameslink, Great Northern and Gatwick Express, said passengers should think carefully before travelling.

She said: "With such extreme temperatures forecast, we have to run fewer trains, more slowly to keep services safe.

"I'd really urge our customers to think about what's best for them and to travel only if absolutely necessary on Wednesday and Thursday."

Passengers who do need to use trains are advised to allow extra time, carry plenty of drinking water, use sunscreen and wear a hat. They should also have a backup plan in case their service is delayed or cancelled.

Southern has said that passengers with tickets dated Tuesday 23, Wednesday 24 or Thursday 25 June who decide not to travel may be eligible for a full refund from their point of purchase.

SWR also advises customers to carry water, avoid standing on exposed platforms in the middle of the day where possible, and leave the train at the next station if they feel unwell so that assistance can be arranged.

Epsom passengers should check the Southern and South Western Railway journey planners shortly before setting out, as the position may change during the day.

Southern, Thameslink and Gatwick Express passengers can check updates through the operator's website or National Rail Enquiries. South Western Railway passengers can check its live journey planner and service updates online.

The advice is likely to affect commuters, visitors travelling into London, and passengers heading towards Surrey's towns and leisure destinations during what is expected to be one of the hottest periods of the year.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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