

## Bit of monkey business in Epsom's Town Hall Chamber

27 January 2026



A meeting of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 22nd January saw councillors approve a new schedule of planning fees and charges for 2026/27, despite repeated concerns being raised during the meeting about the absence of planning officers, gaps in supporting information, and the committee's ability to scrutinise what it was being asked to approve.

The committee was considering fees for discretionary planning services, including Planning Performance Agreements and tree-related services, rather than nationally set statutory planning application fees.

Early in the discussion, councillors were told that questions on planning matters would need to be answered after the meeting. Chair **Peter O'Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) explained this was because no planning officers were present.

One of the first issues raised concerned retrospective planning applications. **Tony Froud** (RA Stoneleigh) recalled that councillors had previously discussed introducing higher charges to discourage developers from building first and seeking permission later.

"We get a lot of developers playing the game... trying to do developments without planning and then getting caught and putting in retrospective applications," he said, adding that he was disappointed not to see such a charge included.

The officer response was that the matter would need to be taken away and clarified with planning colleagues.

During the same exchange, Cllr **Humphrey Reynolds** (RA West Ewell) interjected that "the worst culprit is Hobbledown... application after application retrospectively," referring to the local visitor attraction.

Concerns then turned to the scale and transparency of proposed discretionary fees. Cllr **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College) questioned why discretionary fees were rising by 4.8 per cent, above the headline inflation rate, and whether councillors had sufficient information to justify approving them.

A officer explained that the increase followed the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, which sets fees at CPI plus one per cent, using September inflation figures.

A more sustained exchange followed over officer hourly rates, particularly for tree-related services. Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) calculated that the proposed hourly rate for a tree officer - £133 per hour - implied an equivalent daily rate of over £1,000. "That's an extraordinary amount of money to charge," he said, adding that residents as well as developers were affected by these fees.

An Officer responded that the hourly rates were not based on salary alone and reflected overheads, travel time and the need to maintain regulatory services alongside discretionary work. "These are the prices that we charge for the services we provide," she said, adding that councils were effectively competing with the private sector for this type of work.

However, when pressed on the specific breakdown of what residents receive for certain charges - including a £550 fee to plant a tree - officers acknowledged they could not provide detailed explanations during the meeting and would need to come back with written responses.

At one point, Chair Peter O'Donovan cut short the line of questioning, telling councillors: "That's our charge. People can take it or not use it."

Cllr Coley responded that this was not always the case, noting that some services, such as tree-related consents, could only be authorised by the council.

Questions were also raised about whether councillors had been given comparative data showing how Epsom and Ewell's charges stack up against neighbouring boroughs. Officers said some benchmarking had been carried out but accepted that "it's difficult to compare like for like" because councils offer services in different ways.

Later in the meeting, Cllr Freeman drew attention to newly introduced charges for primate licences, jokingly asking whether the borough was "expecting an invasion from Planet of the Apes". Officers were unable to explain the origin of the charge at the meeting and undertook to respond later.

Despite the unresolved questions, the committee voted to approve the fees and charges as presented.

In a subsequent letter to the Epsom & Ewell Times, Cllr Freeman said the debate left councillors and viewers "feeling that relevant evidence was not provided to committee members when making their decision", particularly given that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is due to be abolished in 2027 as part of local government reorganisation.

"The implication that issues could be looked at 'next time' rather misses the point," he wrote. "There may not be a next time."

Sam Jones - Reporter



PS If you wish to keep a monkey or other primate the fee is £450